Summary report

Autumn Accountability Session with South East 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 | Tuesday 27th October 2026
Report published: Thursday 5th November

Community members questioned South East Water's senior representatives about **everyday communication, supply reliability and future resilience, and leadership accountability**. Members wanted clearer everyday communication and reassurance that the company's plans would improve supply reliability and meet future demand.

The Action Plan Review examined whether **communication commitments** were improving customers' experiences. The Performance Review challenged the company on **persistent leaks, interruptions and its ability to meet future demand**.

During the Q&A, members explored executive pay, the new CEO's commitment to lasting change and accountability for poor service. The key discussion points, company responses and customer requests are outlined on the following pages.

Action Plan Review
Q1: Expanding communication actions

Members questioned whether communication improvements were making a difference to their everyday experiences.

The company described wider customer contact and more targeted support. Members sought clearer bill explanations and follow-ups, a review of staff capacity and training and evidence that support could keep pace with the growing Priority Services Register.

Performance Review
Q2: Supply resilience and future supplies

Members challenged persistent leaks and interruptions, alongside pressures from housing growth and drier summers.

The company outlined investment and operational improvements. Members sought clearer investment explanations, evidence of progress and better use of existing assets.

Q&A Q3:
Executive pay

Members questioned how the CEO could justify a reported higher base salary than his predecessor given South East Water's poor performance.

The CEO highlighted his experience of improving performance in other businesses and his accountability to the board. Follow-up discussion covered his decision to decline a bonus and priorities for reducing interruptions, improving incident response and rebuilding relationships.

Q&A Q4:
New CEO commitments

Members asked how the CEO would demonstrate his commitment to lasting change and what performance targets would determine any future bonus.

The CEO had explained that he had declined a bonus. He outlined an ambition to stabilise performance by spring, reach average sector performance by 2030 and become excellent thereafter.

Q&A Q5:
Service

Members asked how South East Water is held accountable when customers cannot choose another provider.

The company described regulatory oversight, internal accountability and customer engagement. Members also asked South East Water to draw on best practice from better-performing companies to identify opportunities for improvement going forward.

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

This report summarises the key discussions and actions raised by Water Voice community members during the South East Water Accountability Session held **on 27th October 2026**. The actions outlined reflect the improvements community members would like South East Water to make. These are community-led requests and do not represent confirmed commitments from the company at this stage. South East Water will create a formal action plan by **Friday 4th December 2026**, setting out its response to each action, what it intends to deliver and the proposed timescales.

CCW will then monitor progress against the company's commitments and provide monthly updates, allowing community members to see what has changed and continue to hold the company to account.

23 Stephenson Street, Birmingham, B2 4BH

ccw.org.uk
Follow us: @CCWvoice

Q1: Action Plan Review

Strengthening the company's existing actions

How will you strengthen these commitments so all customers see a real improvement in communication, while vulnerable and non-digital customers receive the tailored support they need?

Context from the session:

Members welcomed the reach of customer communications and progress in contacting non-digital customers, but questioned whether this translated into **clear, useful information**. They described a payment-plan increase that was not clearly explained in the text notification or after logging into their account. Another reported a lack of follow-up confirming whether a leak had been fixed. Members also wanted confidence that customer service staff understood local issues and that **support would remain effective as the PSR grew.** The company described its review of communication channels, targeted incident communications and partnerships. Members wanted these arrangements to work consistently in practice.

Existing activity and planned improvements context:

South East Water said that in the last 12 months it had contacted around 21,000 of approximately 50,000 customers without a digital footprint, in order to improve their ability to keep these customers informed. Its Priority Services Register covered **210,000 households**, close to a quarter of its customer base. The company held **mobile numbers for around 80% of customers** and reported sending approximately **14 million text messages** over the previous 12 months.

The company also described **reviewing customer enquiry data** to improve information across its channels to help customers to self-serve. The company was preparing clearer local investment information and **working with charities, health services and community groups** to reach vulnerable and non-digital customers through multiple channels. During incidents, a dedicated communications team supports targeted contact, including outbound calls and door-knocking for PSR customers, alongside messages shared through community partners.

Actions requested by community members:

1A. Explore whether staffing levels and training meet customer needs

Provide evidence that customer service teams have sufficient staffing levels and appropriate training to handle enquiries, particularly from vulnerable customers:

- **Local knowledge:** Assess whether advisers understand relevant local network issues and work taking place.
- **Useful explanations:** Assess whether staff can clearly explain how problems will be addressed and what improvements customers should expect.

1B. Explain bill and payment-plan increases clearly

Provide an everyday language explanation of why a customer's bill or payment plan has increased in a bill insert or accompanying communication.

- **Explain the reasons clearly:** Help customers understand the increase without having to interpret complicated figures or call for clarification.
- **Make notifications more informative:** Where possible, include what is changing and why in text messages or account updates, rather than simply notifying customers that their payment will change.

Actions requested continued overleaf...

Q1: Action Plan Review

Strengthening the company's existing actions

How will you strengthen these commitments so all customers see a real improvement in communication, while vulnerable and non-digital customers receive the tailored support they need?

1C. Demonstrate that PSR support can keep pace with growth

Show how the company will maintain effective support as the number of registered households increases.

- **Service capacity:** Demonstrate how arrangements keep pace with the growing register without reducing the reliability of support.
- **Clear expectations:** Explain what support registered customers can expect and how the company manages its delivery.
- **Awareness before support is needed:** Proactively share this information with the wider customer base, recognising that customers' circumstances may change and they may need support in future. Include clear information for people who are considering to apply to join the register.

Members wanted confidence that support would remain dependable and that customers would understand the help available before they needed to access it.

1D. Follow up every day issues (including operational and billing issues)

Provide faster, clearer follow-ups so customers know what has happened after reporting an issue and what will happen next.

Q2: Performance Review

Challenging the company's performance and service delivery

What will you do now to improve supply reliability and make sure South East Water can meet future demand?

Context from the session:

Members responded positively to the operational resources described, while seeking better communication about leak repairs. Another welcomed **the scale of long-term investment**, while questioning its funding and timing. Members wanted to understand **what the investment and additional resources would deliver, how quickly repairs would improve and how supplies would keep pace with growing demand**. Persistent visible leaks undermined confidence in water-saving messages. Members also questioned the balance between repairing existing assets and building new infrastructure.

Existing activity context:

South East Water described two workstreams within **Project Lighthouse**: "**Make a Difference Today**", focused on immediate improvements to leakage, maintenance and incident response, and "**Fit for the Future**", covering longer-term investment of close to **£2 billion in treatment** works, service reservoirs and pipework.

Its short-term measures focused on reducing leaks, preventing interruptions and improving incident response before the next summer. South East Water reported **a 30% increase in leakage during September** alone. The company had **92 repair teams** and had recruited **29 additional below-ground technicians**, including a night team of 15. Visible-leak repair times were around **10–12 days**, with a five-day target by spring. South East Water already operated a **24-hour control room** and was recruiting dedicated network controllers to strengthen its network-specific capability. Dedicated incident commanders were already operating through a temporary team while a permanent structure was established.

Actions requested by community members:

2A. Prioritise repairing, renewing and making effective use of existing infrastructure

- Prioritise appropriate repairs, upgrades or replacement of existing assets before relying on additional infrastructure.
- Avoid repeated temporary repairs where renewal is needed.
- Explain the balance between maintaining or upgrading existing assets and developing new treatment, storage and pipework, and communicate this effectively with customers.

2B. Explain the investment programme's funding, timing and customer impact

Provide an accessible explanation of the investment programme described as close to £2 billion.

- **Funding sources**: Explain where the investment money comes from and the implications for customers' bills.
- **Timing**: Explain why this scale of investment is happening now and what prevented or constrained earlier action.
- **Customer benefits**: Show what customers should experience as a result of the spending.

2C. Explore incentivising customers for leak reporting and publish feasibility assessment

Look into the feasibility of offering a financial incentive, such as a small bill discount, to encourage customers to report leaks. Complete and publish a feasibility assessment of incentives for customers who report leaks, with a clear decision and next steps, and share outcomes with community members. (Please see point 2C in Company Response)

Actions requested continued overleaf...

Q2: Performance Review

Challenging the company's performance and service delivery

What will you do now to improve supply reliability and make sure South East Water can meet future demand?

2D. Show progress on repairs and water saved

Provide regular, accessible updates showing how many leaks have been fixed and the estimated amount of water saved, so customers can judge tangible progress.

2E. Set out the major investment projects and reasons for choosing them

Provide clear information on:

- **Planned projects:** What work will take place, where and how it will be rolled out.
- **Investment choices:** Why pipe replacement, treatment upgrades or new reservoirs have been chosen and what benefits each will deliver.

2F. Achieve the five-day visible-leak repair target within six months

Members requested that the company reduce repair times to five days within six months.

2G. Show how water supplies will keep pace with growing demand

Set out how South East Water will maintain reliable supplies as housing grows and summers become hotter and drier, including:

- **Expected demand:** How new housing and changing weather are reflected in its forecasts.
- **Available supply:** How planned supplies compare with expected demand.
- **Additional capacity:** Which improvements will provide the water needed and when they will become available.

Company response:

2A. A community member explicitly requested South East Water to restore Weir Wood to help with future demand. During the discussion, South East Water clarified that Weir Wood reservoir is owned and operated by Southern Water. The company explained that it is actively engaging with Southern Water and the Environment Agency to explore options for securing additional water supplies ahead of the planned reinstatement of the associated treatment works by 2030.

2C. South East Water agreed to **consider and test incentives for reporting leaks but** did not commit to introducing a scheme due to concerns about its practicality. If it concludes that a scheme is impractical, South East Water will **explain the reasons** clearly to customers.

2F. Community members welcomed South East Water's existing ambition to **reduce visible-leak repair times to five days by spring 2027**, noting that this aligns with their requested six-month timeframe. The company reported that current repair times were approximately 10–12 days and were improving.

Q&A: Q3

Further questions about the company's services and accountability

Given South East Water's poor performance, what are you going to do differently to justify that level of guaranteed pay to customers?

Context from the session:

Members questioned how the CEO would **justify his reported higher base salary** compared to his predecessor and **what would hold him accountable** for improving performance. He highlighted his experience of improving performance in other businesses and said the Board would judge him on results. Follow-up questions explored his incentives without a performance-related bonus and the specific objectives he had agreed with the Board.

Existing activity context:

The CEO explained that he had **declined a bonus** when joining South East Water. He said an **independent board subcommittee** set his salary using external benchmarking and that his continued employment depended on delivering improvement.

He identified the following priorities:

- **Supply reliability:** Reduce interruptions, particularly major disruptions, and achieve the five day visible leak repair target by spring.
- **Incident response:** Improve practical support, alternative water provision and communications when problems occur.
- **Relationships and transparency:** Rebuild relationships with customers and stakeholders and acknowledge when the company gets things wrong.

The CEO confirmed that interruptions to supply are monitored monthly, alongside wider regulatory performance obligations covering leakage, water quality, customer service and capital delivery.

Actions requested or developed during the discussion:

No additional actions were requested by community members following the company's response.

Q&A: Q4

Further questions about the company's services and accountability

What will reassure customers that you are committed to delivering lasting change rather than following in the footsteps of the previous CEO and what performance targets will determine whether you receive or forgo any future bonus?

Context from the session:

Members wanted reassurance that the new CEO's leadership would bring **lasting improvements**, and clarity on the **performance targets** linked to any future bonus. Having already explained that he had declined a bonus, the CEO focused on the stages through which he and the executive team intended to improve the company's performance.

Existing activity context:

The CEO outlined a staged ambition:

- **By spring:** Stabilise performance and reduce the disruption experienced by customers and pressure on operational teams.
- **By 2030:** Move from poor performance to average performance within the water sector.
- **Beyond 2030:** Become an excellent performer and a company customers would want to choose.

He explained that improvement would require rebuilding the basics and making progress in steps.

Additional actions requested by community members:

No additional actions were requested by community members following the company's response.

Q&A: Q5

Further questions about the company's services and accountability

As customers cannot choose their water provider, how do you ensure South East Water is held accountable when its service falls below the standard customers should expect?

Context from the session:

Members asked how accountability works when customers cannot choose another provider. The company described **regulatory oversight, internal performance management and direct customer engagement**. The member who raised the question felt reassured, welcoming senior leaders' personal commitment and the fact that accountability did not rest solely with Ofwat. Follow-up discussion focused on learning from better-performing companies. The CEO acknowledged that South East Water had been too inward-looking and described increased collaboration and planned visits to other water companies.

The company's explanation of existing activity and constraints:

The company described accountability through:

- **External scrutiny**: Regulatory monitoring and independent oversight of its improvement plans.
- **Internal management**: Reviewing team performance and developing a culture of continuous improvement.
- **Customer engagement**: Bringing customer experiences into decisions and increasing direct contact between senior leaders and customers.

South East Water described discussions with Portsmouth Water and planned visits to Severn Trent and Northumbrian Water to learn from their approaches. The Customer Service Director also highlighted existing collaboration on vulnerability and financial support, alongside opportunities to learn from other industries.

Additional actions requested by community members:

5A. Adopt best practice from other companies to improve service

Learn from better-performing water companies and other sectors where relevant, using this learning to:

- **Identify improvements:** Recognise practices that could address service issues at South East Water.
- **Apply best practice:** Adopt relevant approaches and demonstrate how these lead to practical changes in service delivery.

Attendance list

John Halsall	CEO of South East Water
Douglas Whitfield	Water Supply Director of South East Water
Kerri Ricketts	Customer Services Director of South East Water
Samantha Hare	Senior Insight Manager of Taylor McKenzie Research (TMcK) – Lead facilitator
Rachel Onikosi	Board Member for Consumer Council for Water (CCW) – Meeting Chair
12 x Participants	Water Voice Community Members under South East Water

Please note:: Douglas Whitfield is also referred to as 'Doug' throughout the transcript.

Session transcript

CCW Chair: Good evening, thank you for joining us. My name is Rachel Onikosi, and I am one of the CCW board members. Tonight's session is part of the Water Voice programme. The purpose of Water Voice is simple, but important - to give customers a stronger, more direct voice in how South East Water performs, communicates and improves.

This session is about accountability. It's an opportunity for community members to question senior leaders from South East Water directly about the issues that matter most, what needs to improve, and what would change as a result of this discussion. This is not a complaints hearing or a technical inquiry. It is a structured, customer-led conversation focused on accountability, learning, agreeing clear practical actions.

As community members are aware, the topics we will 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 discussions, this is your agenda.

I want to set a clear tone from the outset for this evening. We expect this to be a very respectable 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 South East Water senior team.

This session is being transcribed, and the agreed outcomes will be published. South East 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 procedure tonight, we will take one person at a time, keeping contributions focused, and concentrate on forward-looking actions; what will change, by when, and how customers will know.

I would now like to briefly introduce our independent facilitator, Sam Hare from Taylor McKenzie Research. Hello Sam, I know people in the room do know you. Sam will guide the customer discussions and ensure all voices are heard.

And now introductions from South East Water senior team this evening, we should have John Halsall, the new CEO, in the room. John, can you introduce yourself, please?

John Halsall: Good evening, Rachel and Sam, nice to meet you both. By way of introduction, my name's John Halsall, I'm the new CEO for South East Water, I've been in post for three months now.

CCW Chair: Grateful. Thank you for joining us, John. We also have Kerri Ricketts in the room. Kerri, could you please introduce yourself?

Kerri Ricketts: Of course, Rachel. Thank you for the welcome to the call, and I'm pleased to meet virtually the community members on the call. This is my first call as South East Water's new Customer Services Director. Like John, this is my fourth month in the role, so looking forward to this session, and thank you for your time.

CCW Chair: Thank you for joining us. We also should have Douglas Whitfield. Douglas, please introduce yourself to the community members.

Douglas Whitfield: Good evening everybody, my name's Douglas Whitfield, I'm the Water Supply Director for South East Water, and nice to see you.

CCW Chair: Grateful. Thank you very much and welcome. Just some housekeeping rules and some points to note. I've said it already, one person speaks at a time. Community members, please use your chat on the action functions if you want to come in at any time. Everybody's contribution is equally valid, whether you are directly affected or otherwise.

Session transcript

Please if you can keep your cameras on, particularly if you are speaking, mics to be muted as they are at the moment if you're not speaking, and if I could ask for mobile devices to be on silent, I will be grateful.

The company, looking to the senior execs, should answer the question directly before moving onto wider context. And just if I can say this to John, Douglas and Kerri, when you are providing your answers, if I need to interject, it's going to be because it's too technical, you're running over time, or the question's ambiguous, so please forgive me if I have to do that. I don't want to do that, but just be mindful about being quite directly focused on responding to the question.

That's all I have to say in terms of introductions, thanks again for being here, I'll now hand you over to Sam, thank you.

TMcK Facilitator: Thank you so much, Rachel, and thank you everyone for joining us this evening. Before we begin, I just want to briefly explain how names and transcripts will be handled this evening. In the room this evening we will use first names only. In the published transcript and the report all customer names will be anonymised, so you'll see yourself as Community Member 1, 2 or 3 and so on.

After the session, you as community members, will have the opportunity to flag anything personal that you would prefer to be removed or further anonymised before publication. For example, if you mention the street you live on or something like that that you later want to retract, absolutely you have the opportunity to do that before the transcript is published.

The purpose of the transcript, as Rachel mentioned, is to accurately reflect the discussion this evening and the actions that have been agreed, as well as any actions that are unable to be put forward for the action plan, it's not to single out any one individual.

There are three main parts to tonight's session. First, we will review the existing action plan and challenge South East Water on the actions that the community have agreed need to be strengthened. Second, we will ask one new performance challenge question, which was developed based on an issue that community members prioritised both during the briefing session, but also during the community engagement in the surveys, so the Spotlight surveys, and the pre-task before the briefing session itself. And third, we'll move on to a shorter question and answer where community members will ask additional questions that were also prioritised during the briefing session and in the pre-task documents.

So, for the first two questions we'll use the same accountability cycle, a community member will ask a question, South East Water will have five minutes to respond. Community members will react to that response and identify what is clear, what is missing and what needs to be strengthened.

We will be creating a live document in the background capturing specific actions and outcomes, so everything that South East Water say they're currently doing, everything they're planning on doing in the future, and also what you as community members have flagged as missing from their current strategy that we're going to be building into the action plan going forward.

During the Q&A we'll use a lighter version of this process, so a nominated community member will ask a question, the company will respond. The question asker then has the opportunity to ask a follow-up question, before the wider community can ask some additional follow-up questions, and any additional commitments will be also captured live in our document.

Anyway, there we go, that's enough intro there, I'll move over to do some introductions, if that's okay. So, I'll just go round the community members, and if you could just introduce yourself with your first name and the area that you live in. And I've made a list, so I'm going to pick on whoever's at the top of my list first, so Community Member 1, that's you please.

Session transcript

Community Member 1: Hi, everyone. My name's Community Member 1, I'm in Tunbridge Wells.

Community Member 2: Community Member 2 from Maidstone.

Community Member 3: I'm in East Dean, which is near Eastbourne.

Community Member 4: Evening. I'm Community Member 4, I live just outside East Grinstead.

Community Member 5: Hi, I'm Community Member 5, I live in Camberley in Surrey.

Community Member 6: Hello, I'm Community Member 6, I live in Eastbourne, East Sussex.

Community Member 7: Community Member 7, I live in Sevenoaks.

Community Member 8: I'm Community Member 8, I live in Polegate.

Community Member 9: I'm Community Member 9 or Community Member 9, and I live in Hailsham.

TMcK Facilitator: Do you prefer Community Member 9?

Community Member 9: Community Member 9, but I will answer-

TMcK Facilitator: We'll stick with that then, Community Member 9. Thank you.

Community Member 10: Hi, I'm Community Member 10 and I currently live in Farnborough.

Community Member 11: Hello, I'm Community Member 11 and I live in Eastbourne.

Community Member 12: I'm Community Member 12, and I live in the Roselands area in Eastbourne.

TMcK Facilitator: Thank you so much. I will now pass you over to Rachel to introduce the first question asker.

CCW Chair: Thank you, Sam. We will now begin our first question, which looks back at commitments already made in South East Water's action plan. During the briefing session community members agreed that improving everyday communication for everybody, including tailored support for vulnerable people and those online, needed further scrutiny. I will now invite Community Member 5 to ask the agreed question. Community Member 5, over to you.

Community Member 5: Thank you. Good evening. Your action plan includes several commitments to improve communication, including some that are already marked as delivered, and others focused on the vulnerable and non-digital customers. But as a community we do not always feel these improvements in our day-to-day experience. Communication should be simple and easy to understand, customers should be able to find the right person to speak to, and they should be kept informed about what is happening and what happens next, not just during emergencies but in everyday situations too. How will you strengthen these commitments so all customers see a real improvement in communication, while vulnerable and non-digital customers receive the tailored support they need?

CCW Chair: Thank you, Community Member 5. I understand John and Kerri are answering this question. Just before you do, it would be very helpful for you to be as specific as possible, ensuring your response answers the question free from any jargon. Community members, please listen very closely to the response, taking notes in case you have any follow-up. Thank you. Over to you, John.

John Halsall: Thank you, Rachel, and thank you, Community Member 5, really good question, close to our heart. If I could just start by introducing myself and saying thank you very much to everybody for your valuable time - it's a hectic life we lead and these sorts of forums are incredibly

useful. I realise that some of you are looking at South East Water's performance and have used South East Water as customers for many years. I just want to make a very clear promise now that things are going to be different as we move forward.

I'm going to hand over to Kerri in a few seconds, but the bit that I wanted to touch on personally was around non-digital customers and vulnerable customers, because I think it's a really tricky element of the problem that you've touched on. We've got something in the order of 50,000 customers that for which we don't have a digital footprint. Out of that 50,000, over the last 12 months we've actually managed to contact 21,000, with another 30,000 to go, so we are working through that list of people. But we really recognise that this is a big challenge, and that some customers, particularly those who are most vulnerable, simply don't have and will never have a digital footprint, so it's really important.

CCW Chair: John, I'm going to jump in. Can you speak slightly louder and perhaps closer to your mic just so it's captured clearly. Apologies for having to interject.

John Halsall: Thank you. The mic is by my chin, so I'll try and adjust it. Is that any better, Rachel?

CCW Chair: Yeah. Looking around the room I think everyone can hear you clearly.

John Halsall: Okay, my apologies. The only other little bit to add to that before I hand over to Kerri, is the evolution of our Priority Service Register, which of course does coincidentally often pick up some of those more vulnerable customers who are less accessible via our normal digital routes. Our PS register is now, we think, getting really complete, we've done some great work in terms of data sharing, we now have 210,000 households who are registered, which is close to a quarter of our households. So we think that's pretty positive.

There's two little intros there, but if I hand over to Kerri who has far greater expertise on the subject than I do.

Kerri Ricketts: Thanks, John, and thanks to the community for the question. I've come over from a different sector, so I've come over from rail, and what's come with me is my passion for information and ensuring that everyone is as fully informed as they can be, and that's our entire customer base.

Very early on in joining we've had a real focus on improving information, and that's information on a day-to-day basis looking at the data of why people are calling us, why they're contacting us, what questions are being raised with MPs and other members, where we can help customers to self-serve. We really appreciate customers' time, and actually if we can make sure that information is available for customers to confidently self-serve.

The other benefit of that is those that do need to call us or contact us, my team actually have phone lines freed up and the capacity to do that. So, we're on a mission to look at all of our channels to look at the communications and the information that's there, and to use the data we have which shows why people are contacting us, what they're concerned about, to populate static information. For example, what we put on our website, we know that the headline figures around how we're going to invest and improve resilience of the network is interesting at best, but at an individual customer level you need to know what that means for you, what does that mean for your water supply? We're working really hard to get that level of detail together, so we can publish it and we can be very transparent so people can see what we're doing next for their water supply.

I do want to mention though around the digital exclusion, I think it's a really important point in the question. If we can get communication and information correct for those that are digitally excluded or the most vulnerable, it will work for everybody and we'll reach everyone. We have got a keen focus on the digital exclusion divide, we know that crosses many industries, which is why we partner really closely, locally and nationally, with charities, with the health service, to try and

bridge that gap. It's not just about water, it's much more broadly.

Looking at some of the latest stats, about 5% of the population are still considered to be offline, and obviously of those, some of those most at risk of being digitally excluded can also be the most vulnerable that we pick up through our Priority Service Register, or PSR. That can be our customers with disabilities or chronic illness, older adults, low income households, and obviously some of those living in more remote communities. So we're acutely aware of that.

Digital's important, we do see digital in terms of self-serve and push communication as important, but one size doesn't fit all. But we do know that during incidents in particular, which is when customers really need communications, I've certainly learnt joining the water industry, I didn't think about my tap whether it would go on and off until there was an issue, and that's when it matters, that's when we need to get communication right.

So we do use many digital channels - we use text messages, web copy, email, social media, to name a few, but we also then ensure that those messages are not just going direct to our customers, but also to other partners. We've got some really good relationships with local community groups, including parish councils, who equally share those messages, so we will do our absolute utmost to get messages out to our customers direct, but also through third parties as well.

John mentioned about some of the improvements and the ongoing focus on the Priority Service Register. One of the really important things that my team in customer services do, is part of our operating model, if you like. Every time a customer calls, if we've got a gap in our contact details for them, we check it's up-to-date, we fill that. We've now got mobile numbers for about 80% of our customers. What that means is, when we're sending text messages during an incident that go through our system, that 80% are directly receiving information during and after an incident, so we can get that information out.

Roughly, I'll round it up slightly, I think over the last 12 months we've sent around 14 million direct text messages. We appreciate that some will work, some won't, but it's one of those things that we know we're now reaching 80% of our customers.

CCW Chair: Kerri, just to say, you have gone over time, but I will allow you to conclude your point.

Kerri Ricketts: No worries, I will just do one final point. On the communications there is something we have invested in that we are seeing and hearing from our customers is adding value, and that's in our incident management process. So we've got our core communications that we kick off, but we will then look at individual situations incident by incident and say what can we do in terms of targeted communications? And that does include outbound calls, door knocking to our Priority Service Register customers, and within that team we now have a dedicated communications team actually dealing with all of our incidents and just making sure we can personalise as much as we can do.

CCW Chair: Thank you. Just to remind the company that if you look at Sam's screen, that's where the timer is, so just make sure that you see that when you're responding to the next question.

Kerri Ricketts: Thank you, Rachel. I should have done a multi-screen, it's my error here, I've just got you in the corner.

CCW Chair: Perhaps flick some of the … there's some arrows, next pages. Okay, thank you for your responses John and Kerri. We're now going to pause and turn back to community members. This part is about testing whether what you have just heard fully answers the concern behind the question. I'll now turn to Sam to start that discussion, thank you.

Session transcript

TMcK Facilitator: Thanks, Rachel, and thank you so much John and Kerri for your response there. As you listen to each other, I want you to think about what you just heard and what felt clear and concrete, or what still feels vague and uncertain, what was missing and what specific commitments that John and Kerri have mentioned still needs to be strengthened or added to further to be developed in our action plan.

If you do have something that you wish to say, pop your hand up, so the little "react" button, or physically put your hand up. I'll come to Community Member 5 first of all. Thank you first of all for asking the question, did it answer what you put forward, or what are your thoughts, Community Member 5?

Community Member 5: It feels good, what I'm hearing, in terms of how South East Water are getting hold of a large proportion of customers, by the sounds of it, with 80% having mobile text messages. There's 50,000 customers identified as non-digital, 21,000 have been contacted so far. Obviously I guess that takes time, so I hear that and it feels good.

An area which I felt was lacking was what we said in the question, how can customers reach out to people at the company? Just to give you an example, I'll do my example of something. Now to be fair, I haven't reached out yet, but I had a bill through recently and it said "your payment plan is changing." Initially, I think I had a text message that said that, and you initially read that and go, "Okay, to what?" and it doesn't tell me anything unless I then take that further. So I then need to log into the account, so logged into the account, seen my bill, and it says "your bill is going up." But it doesn't tell me in simple terms I think as to why, because actually it was quite a big increase. Whilst you get how much water you've used etc, it wasn't clear to me, and I feel like I now have to make a phone call to someone just to get clarity, and that just doesn't feel quite right to me.

I can easily forget that, you see, I think I had the text message, but then I just forget, and I've just reminded myself I need to phone somebody, because that was two or three weeks ago, just to understand. As long as I can understand, that's fine. I think if that was to a non-digital or vulnerable customer, I wonder how they would feel about that? So I'm not sure about that, how well it's been answered myself.

TMcK Facilitator: They mentioned focusing on vulnerable customers as how they create their communication style or strategy. But based on your experience, what would you want them to do differently? If they were to do that again, communicate that with you again, what do we want them to do basically?

Community Member 5: I just think something, for example, in the bill. Something to go alongside the bill just to say this is why this has gone up, as simple as these are the reasons why. I can probably deduce why, but it takes a little bit of looking at that bill and just working it out, and working some numbers out, etc. For me, I could do that, but maybe for others, possibly not.

TMcK Facilitator: Is it just on the bill then, or would you want information provided at any other touchpoints there?

Community Member 5: I'm trying to think about the initial text message. Maybe there could be something in a text message. Or I was going to say, what would be lovely is just a phone call to say, "Hello, South East Water calling, this is what's happened, etc." But I know that takes man hours, etc, so it's a tricky one to answer to be honest, but maybe something initially alongside the bill.

TMcK Facilitator: So a little bit more information when they're-? (overtalking)

Community Member 5: Yeah. Unless I'm missing something. I've just re-checked now and I can't see anything, so yeah.

Session transcript

TMcK Facilitator: Thank you so much, Community Member 5, and thanks again for asking the question.

Community Member 5: You're welcome.

TMcK Facilitator: Does anyone else have anything to add about what they've just heard here? Community Member 3.

Community Member 3: I'm just wondering, have the customer service people got enough staff, and are they trained, experienced and sympathetic to customers ringing in, especially vulnerable ones?

TMcK Facilitator: This isn't a time to ask new questions, but how do we turn that into an action for South East Water, what would we want to see at the contact centres, and what we would want to see happening with the staff there?

Community Member 3: Good training and plenty of them.

TMcK Facilitator: What would training look like, what specifically do they need to be trained on?

Community Member 3: Well, how water worries are likely to be fielded to them, and they need to know a bit about the network locally and what's happening to it, and how the company's going to put things right and what the plan is.

TMcK Facilitator: So, an action then could be more focus on those points within training of customer service agents?

Community Member 3: Yes.

TMcK Facilitator: Okay, thank you, Community Member 3. Community Member 1.

Community Member 1: I found it was interesting that one of the points that John made was that almost a quarter of households now are on the Priority Services Register. My assumption with that is that that has increased recently or over the years. So, what I'd like to see on the action plan is how this increase is being managed, and it's ensured that that Priority Services Register isn't diluted because of the large percentage of people that are now on it, because with past experience it was very hit and miss the last few years when we had lots of water outages in our area. My point for the action plan is, how is the service going to be maintained at an efficient level for all of those people on that register?

TMcK Facilitator: Instead of how, shall we say show us?

Community Member 1: Yeah, show us or demonstrate how, with the increasing number of people on the register, the company is making sure that it's keeping up to speed for that to deliver for all the register.

TMcK Facilitator: And where would you want to see that information, how is it given to you?

Community Member 1: I think the people that are on the register need to see that most definitely, so whether or not it's in the information that's sent out to, I won't say recruit, but to inform people before they decide to opt onto the register, is perhaps a good starting point. But also, I think wider customers also need to know this, because people will move into that position where they need that help. Everybody should get that information about how this is being managed, because it's quite likely that some of them at some point will need to go onto that Priority Services Register.

TMcK Facilitator: So, be a bit more proactive in the future?

Community Member 1: Yeah.

Session transcript

TMcK Facilitator: Okay, Community Member 1, thank you so much. Anyone else got anything to add here? Community Member 7.

Community Member 7: Certainly, the vulnerable has got to be a priority, but on a day-to-day sort of background function, it's hopefully not getting off the topic, but communications related to water leaks I would say needs a serious look at. As an example, a leak that was first initiated in April, I followed up in July, I've had a couple of messages saying, "we're looking at it and we've agreed to block the road and carry out the fix", and this is local on the road next to me, and it's still going on. So, that's a big window. I'm not saying they haven't done anything, but there's been no follow-up, is it fixed? Isn't it fixed? Obviously with the wet weather it's difficult to tell, but because I drive on that road I do try to keep an eye out for it. So, I would say not only priority activities, but day-to-day activities, need some serious concentration, especially where we know leaks are a huge impact on the volume of water lost.

TMcK Facilitator: Community Member 7, we'll be covering supply resilience, prioritising fixing leaks faster and things like that in the next question. But absolutely, we can add a comment into the plan about everyday communication as well. I think there'll be a little bit of overlap there anyway, Community Member 7, with the next question there. That's an interesting point as well to add about communication broadly, and then we can delve deeper into that in a moment as well. Thank you so much for that, Community Member 7.

Anyone else want to jump in here? Community Member 5, did you have your hand up? No. Okay, I will share my screen with what we've talked about so far, bear with me just one moment. I'm going to read through the new actions that we put forward here for the plan, and then I will move back over to the community members again to see if they've got any further comments. If you want to strengthen any of the actions, add to them or add a new action, that will be your opportunity then.

This is what the support facilitators have been typing away into in the background. I won't go through that just now, but we've been putting in all the information that South East Water has said that they're currently doing in relation to expanding communication actions, and what they're planning on doing in the future.

The main column here is what an "ideal" water company response looks like, so that's based on the additional actions that have been discussed this evening. We will of course go back to the action plan tracker that's in place at the moment, make sure there's no overlaps, and strengthen actions that are already on the tracker, if needed, with that new information there as well.

I'll read through these. The first one is [A] ensure customer service staff are adequately trained and have sufficient numbers to handle customer queries, particularly from vulnerable customers. Training should cover knowledge of the local water network and what is happening within it. Staff should be able to clearly explain how the company plans to fix issues and what the improvements will look like.

The second action [B] clearly explain reasons for bill increase in everyday language. Could provide a bill insert or an accompanying communication piece with bills. With a mention as well about, if possible, the text message you get, or the information on the app, just having a little bit more information other than "your bill's going up." As we've realised, maybe a phone call for everybody isn't necessary, if you're able to provide a little bit more information in offline sort of means. Not offline, sorry, in the app or a text message.

[C] Demonstrate South East Water will support company improvements and investments with a growing PSR list. Outlining what PSR support looks like to customers and be proactive with providing this information.

Session transcript

And finally, [D] ensure faster follow-ups to everyday customer issues, and they've said overlap with Question 2. Community Member 7, we'll be coming back to you on that with what ideal communication looks like, specifically for leaks, which is the next topic we'll be moving on to.

Now that we've gone through the four proposed action areas to develop into the action plan, I'll just open it back up to community members for any final comments, or any changes, or anything to add at this point? Some shaking heads. Okay, I'll pass over to Rachel then to get final comment from South East Water.

CCW Chair: Thank you, Sam. Before we finalise these actions, can I ask South East Water whether you believe these commitments are feasible? If not, please explain why. Over to you, John.

John Halsall: Thank you. I think they're good actions, and I appreciate the comments made. I do wonder whether the wording against [A] is a fair reflection of what Community Member 3 said. I think Community Member 3 wasn't suggesting there was necessarily anything wrong, but that is something that is worth us exploring. So perhaps we could change the word from "ensure" to "explore?"

CCW Chair: Yeah, I think that's fair. I think in fairness, Community Member 7's question was whether staff were adequately trained, and of course you don't have an opportunity to answer that question. So "explore" could be the right word, if Community Member 7 is happy with that and community members are not opposed to that. Looking through the room it doesn't look like there's any resistance, John.

John Halsall: Thank you.

CCW Chair: Kerri, anything from you?

Kerri Ricketts: No, Rachel. I really appreciate the points raised and look forward to taking them forwards.

CCW Chair: Okay, let's move on to our next question. We'll now move on to our next new performance issue that community members chose to challenge South East Water on. This topic was prioritised through the pre-task and briefing session, because leaks, supply interruptions and low pressure left community members concerned about meeting future demand as more homes are built and summers become hotter and hotter. Community Member 7, if I could ask you to ask the agreed question, thank you.

Community Member 7: Sorry, I didn't realise. I'm happy to do that. We are already experiencing leaks, supply interruptions and low water pressure, and South East Water has missed its targets for both leakage and supply interruptions. If you are struggling to provide reliable service now, with more homes being built and hotter, drier summers are putting even more pressure on supplies, this is another reason why we, as a community, have such low levels of trust in South East Water. What will you do now to improve supply reliability and make sure that South East Water can meet future demand?

CCW Chair: Thank you, Community Member 7, for asking the question. I have your name down as asking the question, hence why I called your name, but apologies if there was a miscommunication. You did very well though.

Community Member 7: That's no problem.

CCW Chair: Turning to John and Douglas, I believe, again can you be very specific about what is already being done, what will be improved and by when. Community members, please listen very carefully to the responses, take your notes to then ask further questions after. Over to you, John.

Session transcript

John Halsall: Thank you. It's a great question. They are two of my single biggest priorities within the business, interruptions and leakage. It's worth reflecting for a few seconds, so how do we reduce the number of interruptions to supply? Two areas. One, is that we look at the demand side, which means that we reduce leakage, and the other side of the coin is that we improve our ability to supply water by increasing the reliability of our water treatment works. And then there's a final bit, which is longer-term investment by building new water treatment works, by building new service reservoirs, and by improving the pipework that connects all of that together.

We have the biggest investment plan that is in construction that we've ever had in the history of South East Water, close to £2bn. That will help us to build new water treatment works, the pipework and the new service reservoirs. But at the same time, Doug will talk to you in a few seconds explicitly about what we're doing in terms of reducing leakage, improving maintenance, and just acting now to improve the reliability of our water treatment works. Doug.

CCW Chair: Grateful. Doug, you have three and a half minutes, go ahead.

Douglas Whitfield: Thanks, John, and thanks for the question. I'll try and bring to life what John has said. We have a very large investment package, but we are trying to be able to articulate that in the right way that makes sense to customers. John and the team that we've developed over the last few months, we're creating a transformation programme for South East Water. We know we haven't given the service that customers expect and should be receiving from us.

Our transformation programme is Project Lighthouse, and that has two clear paths to it to try and help explain what we're going to be doing. I'm focused on one part of that, which is about what we can do now to make a difference to customer supplies today in the short-term. And the other part is around making sure we are also setting ourselves up to be fit for the future. So, we're doing things to make a difference today or be fit for the future.

If I focus on make a difference today, which is around leakage and interruptions specifically. We are running higher than we would like to on leakage at the moment, and along with the rest of the industry we saw a large leakage outbreak over this summer, and in one month alone in September we saw a 30% increase in leakage, which was through leaks and bursts coming into the system.

We're trying to focus on how we improve leakage quickly. We've got the highest level of resource that we've ever had in the business, we've got over 92 repair teams working to repair those leaks. We set ourselves a challenge on leakage, to make sure that any visible leaks that come in, once they're reported we repair them within five days. We are not there yet, we're running at around 10/11/12 days, but we are seeing that come down, we're seeing those leaks come down, and we're on track to hit that target over the next few months. So, they're some of the things that we're doing there.

Also, on interruption to supply, we have to tackle this in two or three ways. We have to do everything we can to prevent interruptions to supply and events happening in the first place. But in the short-term they will happen, so we have to focus on responding better to those interruptions to supply and those events when they do happen. We also have to try and instil and improve trust with our customers and stakeholders, which hopefully these sessions will do, by trying to explain what we're doing.

On the preventing leaks and bursts, as John's talked about, we've recently increased our repair and maintenance teams. We've got a leakage strategy on detection for leakages. We've also increased our general field staff responding to all network activity. In the last 12 months we've employed an additional 29 technicians on below ground staff across the company. Fifteen of those are the introduction of a dedicated night team, which means we have dedicated people at night working proactively looking for leaks, and able to respond more quickly to any bursts or

events that happen should they occur out-of-hours. We've also expanded our day teams to cover that response time during the day, and that's on below ground.

Centrally what's really important is about introducing more control, make sure we're doing it in a systemised best practice way, so we're introducing a dedicated network control room as well. We've always had a 24-hour control room, and that will be expanded and dedicated out further, but previously that was more focused on above ground, our treatment works' performance. We're introducing dedicated network controllers, which we're currently recruiting for, they'll be in place in the next few months. So, we're doing lots on below ground, responding better, and preventing those leaks happening in the first place.

On above ground, as John said, another cause of interruptions can be treatment works' failure or inability to supply. In the long-term it's about new resources and new treatment works, but in the short-term it's really about how do we make sure that every asset we have is available at all times.

One of the issues that we've had in the short-term that can cause customer interruptions has been power fluctuations, which cause our treatment works to trip out, so we've got a focused programme on dealing with power resilience to install battery supplies to our treatment works, which will mop up any power fluctuations. We've already installed two of those in the last few months, we've got a further six to install before April, and we've got a longer list of 30 that we'll work through in a prioritised way to really try and make sure that resilience is in place, because those short things really are going to make a difference before next summer. That's what we're trying to do, we're trying to make sure we've done everything we can before next summer to make a difference, prevent those events happening.

We've also got a dedicated incident management team in place now. Last year we relied on the teams that are running the areas day-to-day to also manage the incidents. That's good, they're good at doing that, but when they're running an incident, it means they're not running the region to try and prevent the incidents happening. So, we've introduced dedicated incident commanders as a temporary team at the moment, we're just putting in place a permanent structure on that as well.

Hopefully that gives you an outline. I'm happy to answer more questions on it. It's really that we are focusing on how we can prevent these incidents happening, how do we respond better, how do we really make a difference today, but not at the expense of making sure that we are fit for the future.

CCW Chair: Thank you very much, John, thank you very much, Douglas. We're now going to pause and turn back to community members. This part, as you know, is about testing whether what you have heard fully answered the concern behind the question. Sam, over to you.

TMcK Facilitator: Thank you, Rachel, and thank you Douglas and John for answering our question. We're going to go back to the community members now, and I want you to think about what we were discussing during the briefing session. This took up a large portion of our time during the briefing session, and lots of you had lots of different things to say about the topic, as well as lots of good actions that we could put forward to South East Water for the action plan.

I'll start with Community Member 7, since you asked the question and you had some interesting points as well on the previous question about communication here. I want to know your thoughts on the question, did they meet the mark, or are there still some things missing that you still wanted to hear from the response?

Community Member 7: That's all very positive. And that's one of the things that we just had no idea how big the team or group of people that can actually manage this, so that's very positive and we'll wait to see what happens. Also, like I said, the existing system for reporting outages, the communications on that hopefully will improve as a result.

Session transcript

One thing we had discussed or mentioned was, is there a way for an incentive for someone reporting a leak? Because with the best will in the world, eyes on the ground and trying to find these leaks, especially if they're not directly outside somebody's home, there could be leaks like what I've mentioned where is that 100, is that 1,000, several thousand gallons of water lost? It's good to get on top of that.

It's a thought, if somebody reports a leak and gives their details, if there was an incentive for others to report leaks, maybe a discount of a few pounds on the water bill, it would maybe encourage and support the actions already planned, but trying to at least make sure that the identification of leaks are increased as far as volume, and hopefully then subsequently those are fixed quicker.

TMcK Facilitator: Community Member 7, you've brought up a few points there. You said wait and see what happens. Is there anything that they could do I guess in the interim or as things are getting fixed and getting replaced, anything like that that they could be doing there?

Community Member 7: Well maybe they're doing it and I haven't seen it. Is there a way of at least giving updates saying we fixed X hundred leaks, that is a saved estimate of X thousand gallons, etc. I don't know, maybe there's something that I wasn't aware of, but it's a way to communicate back this is our success on outages, this is our success on saving water. Because as we've at least seen a couple of times, the volume of water lost buys another reservoir, in my opinion, that you're not going to have time to build, so it's almost like the elephant in the room.

TMcK Facilitator: So, providing I guess regular updates on how they're progressing, so you can see the changes as they're getting made, rather than just waiting?

Community Member 7: Yes.

TMcK Facilitator: And you said about reporting outages, hopefully that'll get improved. Apart from incentives, or the potential to have incentives which we can put as a potential action and see what South East Water come back with. But in terms of reporting outages, is there anything else you want to add about what would be a good thing to add to the action plan, or what you want South East Water to be doing?

Community Member 7: I presume there is in place a plan for replacing pipe. Because what we know is, we have Victorian pipe systems, and I presume there is an action already in place. I believe it was mentioned previously, South East Water is replacing key areas for pipes, in order to prevent future leakages, which makes good sense. How's that being rolled out? Are there updates that could be provided?

TMcK Facilitator: Community Member 7, we can definitely put that … well, there's a few actions that I think you've put forward there, Community Member 7, so thank you so much, that's fantastic. I'll move on to the next community member, Community Member 11.

Community Member 11: Knowing that Ardingly reservoir is, I'm not saying empty, but it's close to being empty, and knowing that we have another reservoir called Weir Wood, is it 10 miles away, something like that, that is out of use. What I would like to see an action is Weir Wood reservoir go back into use to help meet our future water needs, because apparently the situation is not going to get better, our summers are probably going to be hotter and hotter, apparently, so we definitely need another reservoir. This one is out of use since 2018, so why not fixing that, even if it's expensive, to help us with future needs?

TMcK Facilitator: Okay, so what would the action be for you?

Community Member 11: To fix it basically.

TMcK Facilitator: To fix it, and then communicate that with you, so provide the evidence that they're starting to use it and things like that?

Session transcript

Community Member 11: Yeah, that would be amazing, and it would be amazing if it would be communicated to everybody. I think if we show that instead of building only new things, South East Water takes to heart the fact that there are already places that can be used, and they can fix them instead of throwing them away, let's say just fix what you already have, I think it would be amazing.

TMcK Facilitator: Yeah, absolutely, Community Member 11, thank you so much for that point. Community Member 2.

Community Member 2: My question is about the targets to repair leaks. You mentioned five days is the target, and currently we're on 10-11, so when do you hope to get that down to five, or even less than five days? Because for most customers the visuals of leaks are really, really shocking - on one side when you're asking people to save water and be water efficient, yet people see leakages and gallons and gallons and litres of water gushing out per second. I think it has to be made a priority.

TMcK Facilitator: Absolutely. We're not going to introduce a new question, but what timeframe would you want them to agree to for the five-day target? It's then for South East Water to comment on that and say whether or not it's possible to commit to that timescale or give us a timescale that they can work towards that would work for everybody.

Community Member 2: I would hope months, so I don't know, to give them benefit of the doubt, say six months to get down to five days.

TMcK Facilitator: Okay, we'll put six months and see what they say. How's that?

Community Member 2: Yeah, fine.

TMcK Facilitator: Thank you so much. Community Member 12.

Community Member 12: I read in the newspaper that someone-

TMcK Facilitator: You're quite quiet, Community Member 12, I don't know if you are near your microphone?

Community Member 12: Let's try, I'll get closer to my mic. Can you hear me?

TMcK Facilitator: A little bit better. Can you get any closer, sorry?

Community Member 12: Can you hear me better now?

TMcK Facilitator: That is better. Can everyone hear?

CCW Chair: Yeah.

TMcK Facilitator: I've got nods. Sorry about that, there we go, off you go.

Community Member 12: I read recently in the local newspaper that someone from South East Water, I don't remember their name unfortunately, was saying that they managed to save 3 million litres of water. But the information that we got is that we are losing more than 100 million litres of water per day in the area, not Eastbourne but the whole area.

Community Member 7 pointed out something that basically is a main issue, particularly here in the south, it's not only the water problem, it's the rail problem, that we run on Victorian everything, Victorian plumbing, Victorian railway. The point is, fixing leaks is like putting patches. I think it's the time now to change the pipes that are like 120 years old, even because the newest pipes installed are still very old.

What I would like to see with the new management is a movement towards fixing this problem, not putting patches, because until now the patches didn't bring us in a very good situation, because the leakage that we have now are caused by the fact that we kept putting patches and patches and patches and patches around. So, now we need a complete update of the pipes. I know it takes ages to do that, but I would like to see the company go in that direction, rather than putting patches.

So, my question is, is it better to invest? I don't know the statistic, I don't know the data, but is it better to improve the pipes, actually change the pipes, put new pipes that last a bit longer, or is it better to create a reservoir? Because 100 million litres of water a day, I don't know, is it better to fix the 100 million litres, or to build a new reservoir? This is my question, because somewhere we need to put the money and the priority of what we pay for.

TMcK Facilitator: Yeah, of course. It sounds like a bit of education actually in what they choose they need to justify, or at least back that up with evidence as to why they're picking one over the other, or how they're prioritising things. I'm trying to think how we can build that into an action, and I guess it could be something like depending on what sort of infrastructure or development that they decide, that it's communicated as the reasons why they've picked one over the other, so you have that information available. Because obviously you're saying that you don't know whether reservoirs are better, or replacing the pipes are better. So, I think maybe when they do make these investments, that they have the justification and they can provide that to you. Does that sound round about right, Community Member 12?

Community Member 12: Yes, exactly. I would like to understand what is better to do, and how do they take the decision to choose the pipes rather than the reservoir, or the reservoir rather than the pipes, as priority, because I mean this is my feeling, we need to focus on one of the two. 100 million litres of water a day is a worrying number, from my perspective anyway.

TMcK Facilitator: Thank you, Community Member 12. Staying on you for a second, you during the briefing session mentioned a bit about housing developments and things like that. Was your point covered off in their response here?

Community Member 12: Yeah, I heard something about that, that they're considering that. It's still a way that we put on old infrastructure, so we need to be careful with what we do, let's say.

TMcK Facilitator: Absolutely. Thank you so much, Community Member 12.

Community Member 12: You're welcome.

TMcK Facilitator: Community Member 9.

Community Member 9: Firstly, it's been really nice to actually hear there's such a significant investment going in to improving things long-term, and obviously £2bn is a massive investment. Given that many of the measures appear to be addressing problems … I don't know if this counts as a new question, by the way, so I might get a slap on the wrist.

TMcK Facilitator: I'll listen to you and I'll let you know.

Community Member 9: Given that many of the measures appear to be addressing problems customers have experienced for some time, why is only now that this massive investment, the biggest of its kind, is coming in? And where is this £2bn investment coming from, because I'm poorer than I've ever been, so as a normal person you kind of want to know where all this money's coming from, and ultimately is it going to hit the consumer?

TMcK Facilitator: Okay, absolutely. We can throw in your question, I guess, into an action, in that they tell you where your money's being spent. For example, if they're looking at the infrastructure in a particular area, or particular reservoir, then maybe an action could be to provide information

about how that's funded, alongside why they're doing it and why they're prioritising it as well?

Community Member 9: Yeah, as opposed to where our money's being spent, where their money's coming from. Does that make sense? Where that investment's coming from.

TMcK Facilitator: Okay, absolutely. So, it could be a two-way street there then?

Community Member 9: Yeah.

TMcK Facilitator: Would that answer both of your questions there, or is that just the last one?

Community Member 9: I think so, yeah. It would be good to understand why now, what's prohibited this action happening before? Because these aren't new issues, the reservoirs have been getting lower for a long time, the summers have been getting hotter for a long time, this isn't a new issue, so I guess what instigated the change now?

TMcK Facilitator: And again, maybe that comes down to being more proactive in all the things that we've talked about, so how leaks are prioritised, how they're fixed, everything like that, and they can provide that information there too. Does that sound okay?

Community Member 9: Yeah.

TMcK Facilitator: Thank you so much, Community Member 9. Anybody else want to jump in here? Community Member 5.

Community Member 5: I can't remember, forgive me, if there was an explanation regarding meeting demand for more homes being built, etc, did I miss that? I get the whole investment, £2bn worth and all the rest of it, but I'm not so sure I heard anything about that. Did I miss something?

TMcK Facilitator: You're getting a shaking head from John, so no. What were you hoping to hear?

Community Member 5: I was kind of hoping to hear, because as population grows, demand for housing, there's a Budget tomorrow, there's going to be I think an announcement regarding the key home sort of worker type scheme, and the anticipation is for more homes to be built particularly around the South East. My concern is, how does South East Water cope with that demand whilst you're also coping with, we've just been talking about summers being hotter, drier, and that's the way it's going to go, is it not? That's a concern for me, and I'm not sure that was addressed, that's why I was raising that, that's all. Yeah, so I just wondered about that, was all.

TMcK Facilitator: I guess one thing could be communicating how they're able to address both, so more housing, but also making sure there's water available. Is there something else they could do, maybe more of an evidence-based action, or something they could be doing with developers or whoever it is themselves? I think something like that was mentioned in the briefing session, I'm not too sure who it was mentioned it, perhaps it was you, Community Member 5, but is there anything there that you can think of?

Community Member 5: No. I mean as I say, I get the whole investment, liability of service and looking into water treatment works, reservoirs and the rest of it, but it's the pipework, we're talking about old pipework. I don't know, I'm just wondering how that's going to look basically? I can't remember his name, the chap that just spoke beforehand from South East Water, there was a lot going on there in the space of four or five minutes and I was frantically writing stuff down, and I'm looking at my notes, Project Lighthouse, fit for the future, and we can all say these things, can't we, fitter, faster, stronger, whatever you want to call it, but it's how would that look really, because it's going to happen with homes, isn't it? I'm interested particularly in that area.

Session transcript

TMcK Facilitator: So maybe a bit of an education piece again to have that information there, and how that would work to manage your expectations or your worries when it comes to increasing housing and population growth but also meeting water supply demands.

Community Member 5: Yeah.

TMcK Facilitator: Thank you so much, Community Member 5. Community Member 6, I just want to bring you in to the conversation, you mentioned obviously the 2030 plans for reservoirs. What are your thoughts now that you've heard from John and Douglas?

Community Member 6: I still think we need new reservoirs, but I still think the problem is the dry weather, we're not going to be filling them up much in the summer when we need the water, and all the hosepipe bans start. The weather we've had this week, how long is it going to take to fill a reservoir, and when will it actually be able to come back to us and delivered to us? When you hear of reservoirs that are there and are filled up and they're not using them, you wonder why.

TMcK Facilitator: What could South East Water do then?

Community Member 6: Well, certainly use the water that is there in the other reservoirs. Also, how much leakage is there out of Ardingly reservoir? They say it's gone down terribly low. Has there been a lot of leakage underground with all that, rather than just blaming it on the weather?

TMcK Facilitator: I guess that comes down to leak detection and things like that there then maybe?

Community Member 6: Yeah.

TMcK Facilitator: Okay. Community Member 4, anything from you on this? I know that you brought up about making sure that these sorts of processes that they're going to develop are actionable. Is there anything you want to add?

Community Member 4: I'd quite like to understand whether or not the actions that have been mentioned, South East Water feel like that is enough? Should that make us feel more confident in their capability to supply our water for us, because it's not like we've got a choice about it.

TMcK Facilitator: Okay, Community Member 4, that brings us onto next. What I can do is share my screen, go through the actions now, and then maybe that could be a follow-up question for South East Water to see if they think that that would help with future supplies and resilience. Yeah?

Community Member 4: Yeah.

TMcK Facilitator: Okay, we'll do that then. Has anyone else got anything they want to add before I do share the actions that we've been discussing? We're all okay? Okay.

As Community Member 5 mentioned, South East Water had a lot to say on this topic about all the things that they're currently doing, and what they've got planned in future, so I won't go through all that again, but thank you so much for the information, Douglas. What I will do is go through what the "ideal" water company response looks like, or the actions that have been put forward today by community members.

South East Water to fix Weir Wood reservoir and communicate progress to all customers. Prioritise fixing and using existing water assets before building new infrastructure. Transparently communicate the source of its £2bn funding, and justify the timing, so why is it happening now, and what are you doing? Also, explain the impact to customers, so what they'll see off the back of that spending.

Session transcript

Incentivise leak reporting, for example, offer a small bill discount to customers who identify leaks to help promote people reporting leaks that aren't necessarily in their house or close-by.

Provide regular updates on leaks fixed and the amount of water saved, so customers can see the tangible progress.

Communicate largescale leakage reduction investment projects to customers. Justify if existing infrastructure, for example, pipes are upgraded, or if new infrastructure or reservoirs are built, and explain why one is chosen over the other. So, a bit of an education into why South East Water are picking one thing over the other and the benefits, and why they're prioritising what they're prioritising.

Achieve the five-day leak repair target within six months.

And finally, outline how South East Water will address supply reliability with growing housing demand. It's an opportunity to explain current investment projects and works with a clear educational piece to manage everyone's fears for the future, so they've got that information available to them.

Okay, lots of great actions that have been put forward here. I just want to go back to the community, first of all, just to see if we've missed anything, if you want to add to anything or develop anything further, now's your opportunity to jump in. Community Member 3, straightaway I'll go to you.

Community Member 3: I'm just wondering if Weir Wood reservoir belongs to South East Water, or does it belong to Southern Water, and how does that leave us?

TMcK Facilitator: I saw Douglas nodding his head, so I'm sure he'll be ready to answer that in a second when we go back to the water company. Douglas, hold fire just one second and bear that in mind for when we go back to you. Okay, thank you for that, Community Member 3. Anyone else want to jump in here and add any final comments before Rachel goes back to South East Water? We're all happy everything's been captured? I've got some nods. Okay, Rachel, back to you.

CCW Chair: Thank you, Sam, thank you community members. Before we finalise these actions, let me go back to South East Water. I'll give you five minutes to highlight any commitments that you believe are not feasible as currently listed and explain why. If there are any operational, regulatory, financial or any other constraints, please be specific about what those are and what you can commit to instead. So over to you, John, in the first instance.

John Halsall: I'll let Doug explain Weir Wood. I think on the incentivisation of leak reporting, happy to consider it. There are a number of practical challenges with it, so if we could put "consider incentivising leak reporting," that would be appreciated.

CCW Chair: Can I just ask, John, when you say "consider," what would that consideration look like? Only because I wouldn't want us to agree that and South East Water comes back saying, "We've considered it and it's not feasible."

John Halsall: Off the top of my head, I am very concerned as to the practicality of it. You could put a modest incentivisation in, and then we spend hundreds of pounds investigating a leak which somebody claims was there. Unfortunately, not everybody's as honest as we might like. I'm really happy to give it some thought and explain whether or not we think it's practical, but I am a bit concerned as to whether it is practical, I've spent 20 years doing this sort of stuff and we have been round the buoys on it a few times.

But we would explain if we think it isn't practical, exactly why for Community Member 3, because on face value it makes a lot of sense, but when you start scratching beneath the surface it maybe wouldn't work.

Session transcript

But happy to explain it, so consider it, test it, and if we don't think it's practical, explain why very publicly.

CCW Chair: Okay, that's fine. I was thinking perhaps whether giving it a trial might make any difference, but I think you're saying any which way the practicalities of it still remain. Is that right?

John Halsall: Yeah. I think it's a great idea and let's not kill it straightaway, let's just have a look at it. But just change the word from "actually we're going to do it," to "consider it," and we'll publish why we don't think it's practical in the event that that proves to be the case.

CCW Chair: Okay, that's good, thank you. Doug, I think you're going to address action A that's listed at the moment?

Douglas Whitfield: Just a point of clarification, and I think it was Community Member 3 that said, was correct, we don't own Weir Wood reservoir. Weir Wood is a raw water reservoir, it's a storage reservoir that is owned and operated by Southern Water. Southern Water are currently rebuilding the treatment works that uses the water from Weir Wood and pumps it into their distribution network. We are entitled to a bulk supply of that treated water into the South East Water network, but obviously we can't take that bulk supply at the moment because there is currently no treatment works at that site to produce the water.

Southern Water are in their investment programme, the same as we are, their current plan as I understand it is to rebuild that treatment works by 2030. So, if we don't do anything differently, we will have a treated water supply available to us from Weir Wood via Southern Water's new treatment works from 2030 onwards.

But clearly that is a problem for us, and there was mention that Ardingly reservoir is low this year. One of the reasons, adding to the fact that it's been a very long, hot summer, is that we don't have that water coming from Weir Wood. We are in active discussions with Southern Water and the Environment Agency about what other options we may have to give us some supply from Weir Wood. But it's not our reservoir, it's owned by Southern, and is currently in a project for them to rebuild that treatment works.

CCW Chair: In terms of the action then, there has been an amendment to it. Is that a feasible action then? How much power do you have in terms of prioritising and fixing if you don't own the reservoir, perhaps you can have a look at that?

John Halsall: We have no power over Southern Water's programme, we can speak to them and encourage them, but that is their programme. What we are looking at is are there any alternatives that would give us a smaller supply before their treatment works is rebuilt?

CCW Chair: Doug, just looking at action A then, have a read of that and see whether you think it needs amending based on what you've just said.

Douglas Whitfield: I think that's okay as a general action. Yeah, happy to feed back on the discussion around how we prioritise fixing existing assets over new assets, and how that prioritisation is balanced not only between new and existing assets, but between above ground treatment works assets and below ground, the pipes in the ground. So yeah, I think that's fine.

CCW Chair: Thank you. Just quickly turning to community members, there's been a slight amendment to the actions. I just want to make sure that nobody has any concerns around that? We've heard the explanations from Doug and John, we've got some comments in the final box. I'm happy to move on from these actions, unless anybody has anything to say on it? Quickly look around the room-

TMcK Facilitator: Community Member 11 has her hand up.

Session transcript

CCW Chair: Community Member 11, please go ahead.

Community Member 11: Sorry, I didn't properly understand. Southern owns Weir Wood, got it, so how – it's difficult to put into words – how South East Water can operate with Southern Water, I didn't get that bit. Can you just explain to a consumer that doesn't know the technicality, let's say, please?

CCW Chair: I'll let Doug do that. Go ahead, Doug, please.

Douglas Whitfield: Very briefly, Southern Water are next to us, so they have a mains network in the same way that we have a mains network, we can connect onto their network, and either we can take water from Southern Water into our network, or in some instances we can give water to Southern Water. We do buy and sell water and help each other out with supplies of water, but that asset is owned by Southern Water. Nearly all of the water from Weir Wood is pumped to Southern Water's distribution network, but we can take a connection off it into the South East Water network.

Community Member 11: So, you don't have the chance to communicate with them and try, I'm not saying to push them of course, but to sort of like cooperate with them and be like, "Look, this needs to be done?"

Douglas Whitfield: We absolutely do, and we are having those conversations daily with them. But because they are going to be 2030 until they build it, we can try and make sure that happens when it's due, but we can't influence their programme. We are looking at whether there's any options we can do before 2030 that might help us, but we can't influence that Southern Water project.

CCW Chair: Thank you, Doug. I hope that answered your questions, Community Member 11. All right, so let's agree the actions as we see them on the screen. This will be added to the company's action plan alongside the commitments agreed during our first discussion.

We're going to move on to the Q&A part of this session, and we have about 40 minutes to do that, I think we are ahead of time by eight minutes actually. There is no timer for this session, South East Water, but please keep your answers specific. I will allow five minutes per question, perhaps a bit more because we've got a little bit of time actually. In terms of the first question being asked, I believe that's being asked by Community Member 9?

Community Member 9: Yes.

CCW Chair: Can we put that question on the screen, please, Taylor McKenzie. Okay, over to you, Community Member 9.

Community Member 9: Sorry, putting you in the hot seat here, John. Your base salary has been reported as higher than the previous CEOs, and given South East Water's poor performance, what are you going to do differently to justify that level of what is guaranteed pay to the consumer and us as customers?

John Halsall: Thank you. Look, it's a very reasonable question and I'm very conscious that I'm fortunate to earn the salary I earn, I don't take it lightly. The reason, I'm not sure "justifiable" is the right word, but the reason I think that I carry a salary like that is because I will be doing things differently, and my job is to turn South East Water round over the next few years to deliver a transformational level of service, a service that customers haven't received for a few years. That's my job.

Customers will measure me personally, not by what I say, and indeed a few of you have already said this evening that these are just words, and of course they are words until they translate into action and results, and both you, and indeed the Board that I work for and report to, will constantly

measure my performance, and in the event that I don't deliver, I suspect the Board will request my departure prior to customers do.

There are a few points, and as I said, I do emphasise that I don't take my fortunate position in terms of the salary lightly. But I've spent more than 30 years getting to the point that I've got to, and I have a good 15 years of doing nothing but transforming businesses both in water and in rail and sitting and leading thousands of people to deliver a different result, and that's what I get paid the money to do.

CCW Chair: Thank you, John, very helpful. Community Member 9, do you have any follow-up questions to John's response?

Community Member 9: Yes, I did. Obviously, customers can't vote with their feet like they would with anyone else, if I don't agree, or I don't like South East Water, or I don't think you're delivering, I can't just go, "Sorry, I want to go somewhere else," like I can with my gas or electric. What is the equivalent of market accountability for you and South East Water's senior leadership? You're also in a really unfortunate position where everything's so public, I guess. Your predecessor was in a performance related bonus situation, so he had to do well. I've managed a sales team for a long time, and they have to do well, or they don't pay their mortgage that month. If you're not in that performance related budget, where's your incentive to make sure your specific targets are hit, and what can we as consumers do if ultimately, they're not hit, where's the consequence, I guess?

John Halsall: It's a great question, and the subject of bonuses, usually the argument is opposite to what you said, Community Member 9, which is that customers are angry that any Chief Executive, or indeed any Senior Director, gets any bonus ever who works for a water company irrespective of what their performance is. When I joined South East Water I said, "Look, I don't want a bonus, I don't want to have an argument once a year as to whether or not I deserve a bonus," and so I said I didn't want one, that's how it worked.

In terms of independent review, the salary that I was offered was set by an independent sub-committee of our board, and that board have to explain the rationale for my salary to our regulator, Ofwat, so in the event they decided to pay me too much, then the regulator would object to that and take issue with it.

What the sub-committee of the board also do is they get independent validated benchmarking carried out, to test whether or not my salary is appropriate. I would say that compared to the other water companies, recognising that we are a small water company, I get paid less than all bar a couple of the other Chief Executives, all of whom are bonused, whereas I am not.

In terms of incentivisation, the last thing I would say is that I really do want to keep my job, and, in the event that I don't do it well and turn things around, I will be sacked. Whereas in the event that I would suggest that you don't do a brilliant job, you will get a reduced bonus.

CCW Chair: Thank you, John. Hopefully that's answered your question, Community Member 9. I think you've answered the question in full, but just checking with community members, any more follow-ups in relation to that first Q&A? Looking around the room, Community Member 7, have you unmuted yourself?

Community Member 7: Yes. I'm sorry, I tried to put the hand up and it doesn't seem to be working on mine. I would like to ask, are there any specific targets that you have personally set out, or agreed with the board that you must hit, or show why you didn't hit those over the coming, say, three to five years?

John Halsall: Thank you, Community Member 7, it's a fab question. The first element to it is, since I've arrived ironically, I've set Doug the five-day target, and I can't remember who said within six months, I think it was Community Member 12, but by a quirk of fate Doug's target is five-days by

the spring next year, so that's six months exactly. So, somebody hit the nail on the head in terms of that one.

The other three very urgent priorities that I've committed to the board since I've arrived, first the one, and Doug's touched on it, is improvement in terms of interruptions to supply, and in particular major interruptions to supply. So, I'm thinking Tunbridge Wells, Community Member 1, I think that's where you're from, so a reduction in those interruptions to supply.

The second promise I've made to the board is to reset relationships with groups like CCW, our regulators, our councils, our MPs, and of course our customers, and to really start being more honest, authentic, transparent, and when we get things wrong to put our hands up. So that's the second promise.

And then the third promise is associated with the fact that when things go wrong, that we do a much better job in how we respond, so both in terms of priority customers, bottled water, transparent communications. They're three a little bit soft, but some of them are quite hard, promises.

In terms of the next three to five years, we have a number of regulatory obligations that we have to deliver which are very visible, and we are measured on a 6 and 12 monthly basis in terms of how we deliver them. They include leakage targets, interruptions to supply, water quality, the list goes on, also some on customer services. But also, we have obligations in terms of our capital programme, and there I'm looking at Kerri, but I believe that they are all visible on our website as to what they are.

CCW Chair: Thank you very much, John. Before we move on to the second Q&A, just turning to Sam, I don't think there are any new actions out of that question, but Sam, please advise.

TMcK Facilitator: Thanks, Rachel. No, no new actions proposed by the community. But all actions that John has just mentioned there actually around the five days to fix a leak, reducing interruptions to supply, resetting relationships, and doing better when things go wrong, as well as your regulatory obligations, that will all get put into the action plan and mentioned the context for that. But no new actions from the community members.

CCW Chair: Thank you very much. Moving on to Question 2, can I ask Community Member 11 please to ask the question. Just before we do that, Community Member 7, I can see your hand is up, is it a legacy hand?

Community Member 7: Yes, I finally got it working. I did, if I could, have one follow-up. The first action John talked about, improvements, is there any criteria/objectives that need to be met? If I could ask that, please.

CCW Chair: Okay, Community Member 7, I will allow John, if you may, just quickly answer that question please for Community Member 7, as we're on the session.

John Halsall: The most important one is in terms of interruptions to supply, Community Member 7, and that is something that we measure on a monthly basis.

Community Member 7: Thank you.

CCW Chair: Thank you very much. Community Member 11, please ask the second Q&A question.

Community Member 11: I think that part of the question has been already answered, but anyway. What will reassure customers that you are committed to delivering lasting change, rather than following in the footsteps of the previous CEO, what performance targets will determine whether you receive or forego any future bonus? And this is linked to the fact that your predecessor basically renounced his bonus and then decided to leave after a month. Just to be clear.

Session transcript

CCW Chair: Of course. John, I think you have largely answered both parts of that question, but is there anything else you can elaborate on as the question's been posed specifically?

John Halsall: I think the only build on what I've already said would be that my vision, along with Doug, Kerri and other colleagues on the executive, is that it's just putting some timescales. What we see between now and spring is South East Water, that generally, particularly in the Kent area, particularly in Community Member 1's area, that we're able to calm things down both for customers and for my team who work incredibly hard, who care passionately and are getting quite exhausted, that over the next few months we just steady what is the sort of rolling boat a little bit, and we're just able to stabilise what is fairly hectic performance.

Then over the next two or three years, up to the end of this asset management period, so 2030, and forgive me for this, we become average as opposed to poor performance. We want to get to a position where customers are going, "Well, it's sort of okay, it's not perfect, but it's sort of okay." And then as we go post-2030, our vision is that we become excellent, that customers go, "We really want South East Water to be the water company that we have. We choose them, we would want them." So that's the journey that we believe we're on.

In the event that I said in a year's time we're going to be brilliant, nobody would believe us. Our plan is that we do this in steps, so stabilise, get a little bit better and just build the basics, and then as we build forward from there that we become a water company of choice, recognising that we are a monopoly. But I can't fix that, so …

CCW Chair: Thank you. Community Member 11, do you have any follow-up questions to John's response?

Community Member 11: No. From the answer it sounds like we are assured that the next accountability session we're going to have John back, because he's not going to leave, hopefully!

John Halsall: Talk to my board, Community Member 11.

CCW Chair: Looking around the room, any follow-ups from anybody else? I'm looking for hands or emojis. It doesn't look like it, John, it looks like you answered that very robustly, thank you very much. Our third Q&A question, can I invite Community Member 2, please, to ask the question.

Community Member 2: As customers cannot choose their water provider, how do you ensure South East Water is held accountable when its service falls below the standard customers should expect?

John Halsall: Thank you, Community Member 2. I'm going to do half of this, then I'll hand over to Doug to do a little bit as well and fill in any gaps. You're quite right, we are a monopoly in the main, and you're right, you don't have a choice of who provides your water. That is the role of Ofwat to make sure that if any of our key performance metrics, so whether it's customer service, if it's operations, if it's leakage interruptions, if we spend money carelessly, if we charge customers too much, every aspect of what we do as a company is monitored.

In the event that we do let customers down, and we have done, I'm very sorry, but we've not delivered the service to customers that they pay for or that they deserve, then our regulator will take a variety of different actions. Initially it's typically fines, and you will see that we were fined. Now, that's translated into a promise for improved service, so that instead of effectively the government getting the money, customers, that we're fined by, we agree with the regulator that we will reinvest that fine to deliver improved services to customers, and that is paid for by shareholders, not by customers, otherwise that wouldn't make sense.

The next thing, if that doesn't work the regulator will apply even greater scrutiny, and that is exactly what the regulator has done, and we currently have what you might call an inspector who

is joining the business for the next couple of years to keep a very tight eye on what we do, and whether our action plan, some of which we've talked to you all this evening about, whether they're robust and fit for purpose. In the event that they're not, they will report to the regulator, and once again the regulator will consider the actions that they want to take.

So, we are highly scrutinised, and if we don't respond appropriately to that scrutiny, then actions are taken against us.

I'll just hand over to Doug, and indeed Kerri, to see if they've got anything just to build on what I've said.

Douglas Whitfield: Thank you, John. I won't build on anything on the external, how we're held to account externally, but I really would like to try and reassure you that we hold ourselves to account internally. We are all, as John said, and I can speak for all of my team and others on the call, we are absolutely passionate about what we do, and we are unbelievably frustrated when we don't deliver the service that we want to give to you.

Also, I would say the majority of my staff are customers of South East Water as well, we live and we work in the area, we're very much part of the community that we're trying to serve, and we're doing the best that we can, and we know we need to improve.

For the holding to account, if I speak for water supply, as well as the assets and the investment, it's about the culture of the business, and it's embedding a culture of continuous improvement to make sure that we're never sitting still and we're always trying to do better. We try and set that up through the various initiatives and programmes we've got, to set up competition within South East Water amongst the teams, to measure them to make sure we're driving that continuous improvement, adopting best practice, and really trying to live up to the vision and the values that we've set ourselves as a business.

So, we've got that external scrutiny, we're a heavily regulated business. I think where we are getting to with the mindset now is actually with the inspector that John has mentioned coming in, we welcome that actually, we would like to show them that what we are trying to do is adopt that best practice, and hopefully they can take that back to the regulators and say, "Yeah, they're doing the right things," and other companies can come and learn from us, would be a nice place to get to. So that's what I would add from an internal point-of-view.

Kerri Ricketts: Rachel, conscious of time, but would I be okay just to add a few more points to that, is that okay?

CCW Chair: Yes, please, yeah.

Kerri Ricketts: I think it's a really interesting one about external, and we've got regulators, we're used to regulators, John and I coming from the rail sector as well, and I think they are overarching on top of it. But as Doug said, I think we hold ourselves to account. The community have given up their time this evening, I can only give the assurance that the customer's always in the room. We make sure, and I think all of the execs are the same, we make sure the consideration of our customer, our customer voice, is in every meeting that we have. Whether that's an incident call where we're looking at the incident and we're saying what do we do next, it's not talking about customers are some remote entity, or an engineering project, or a pipe that needs fixing, it's that ultimate end customer and what do we need to do? And I think that comes through loud and clear in everything we do.

The other thing we do is, we hold ourselves to account in front of our customers. I really enjoy these community groups, and also welcome CCW's involvement there, they're coming to visit us later on this week to look at complaints handling. But equally, we're out there, probably more so than we've done previously, directly talking to our customers.

Session transcript

And that's not the customer team, that's our CFO, that's John, that's Doug, face-to-face with our customers hearing about their reality. I think that's so important, it's not what the regulators tell us, it's when we're in front of our customers we're really hearing, listening and taking action on what they tell us.

CCW Chair: Grateful. Thank you so much, Kerri, John and Doug. Community Member 2, any follow-ups from you in relation to the responses you've heard?

Community Member 2: No. I'm actually quite reassured. I like to hear the personal commitment, and the fact that you're not leaving everything to the regulator, to Ofwat. There are a lot more systems in place, it's a lot more observed, so yeah, I'm somewhat more reassured.

CCW Chair: Thank you. Looking around the room, any follow-ups from anybody? Anyone that hasn't spoken? No pressure. No, okay.

TMcK Facilitator: We've got Community Member 12 and then Community Member 7.

CCW Chair: They're not on my screen. Apologies.

TMcK Facilitator: Community Member 12, if you want to jump in?

CCW Chair: Yes please, Community Member 12.

Community Member 12: Can you hear me now?

CCW Chair: Yes.

Community Member 12: I would like to ask John and South East Water, in general, it's more like a recap about the points that we got until now. Is there any way you can check what the other companies around England have done until now, and try to get in a better position? What I'm saying is, in a way try to copy from the other companies. I did some research myself and I know, for example, everybody talks about London, Thames Water, which is always the worst, the worst, the worst, but we in South East Water are worse than London.

So, I did some research and tried to understand what company would work better in England, and apparently what I noticed was that Portsmouth Water compared to South East Water in terms of leakage is 40% less than us, so they are doing great, and they are doing the right investment on updating and actually creating a new modern reservoir and changing the pipes to more modern pipes. So, they are doing very good steps apparently compared to the rest of England. Can we copy? The question is very direct; can we try to take that …? Are you taking into consideration other companies and try to improve our company? I want to say "our company," because I want to still consider this is a community thing. I know it's private, but it's a still a community thing, the water is important.

CCW Chair: So essentially, Community Member 12, best practice, isn't it?

Community Member 12: Yeah. Trying to see if other companies can do better, maybe we can actually copy and try to reproduce, let's say, that goal.

CCW Chair: Yeah, absolutely. John.

John Halsall: Community Member 12, you're spot on. I was with Bob, who is in charge of Portsmouth Water about four hours ago talking to him about it, and I was also with the other Chief Execs of the water companies, and we were talking about a variety of different areas of best practice. We will be visiting probably not Portsmouth Water for reasons I won't bore you with, but Severn Trent Water and Northumbrian Water are two larger water companies that really are first class in terms of what they deliver. We never miss an opportunity to talk to Affinity Water and Portsmouth Water, but their circumstances are slightly different.

Session transcript

It is true to say that we have been too inward looking as a company for quite a few years, and we are starting to look outwards much more actively. I've worked for three different water companies, this is my third water company, Doug has worked for two water companies, new members of my exec are from different new water companies, and all of those different ideas from different people bring in a different lens to look at how we do things and introduce some of that best practice.

So, the short answer is yes, but also having new members around the exec table who have worked for other water companies and other infrastructure companies such as Kerri, also helps as well.

Kerri Ricketts: I'm being really cheeky here, Rachel, can I add as well?

CCW Chair: You may. We have a little bit of extra time, so go ahead, Kerri, yes.

Kerri Ricketts: Oh brilliant. It's just that I think there is a challenge. We look at other water companies, I know there's a lot of collaboration that already exists. For example, within my team as I've come in, I've been really impressed by how much the teams in customer service get together. When they talk about things like vulnerability and collaborating, we all want the same outcome, so what's best practice? Also, things like debts and how we deal with customers that are in debt or financial difficulties. So, a lot of it happens at that level.

I think the other opportunity we've got coming from a different industry is to not always just look at the water industry. I guess I say it from a customer service point of view of we are at risk of just doing a silo. When we look at good information or good customer service, actually we need to make sure we take in best practice from other industries as well, because that's who our customers compare us against.

CCW Chair: Absolutely. And just to say for community members, that CC Water brings water companies together anyway to share best practice. A good example is the vulnerability seminar on 19th November where companies come along and share best practice around vulnerability and customers who have affordability issues. Any follow-ups to Question 3, customer standards? Looking around the room, did Community Member 7 have his hand up at a certain stage?

Kerri Ricketts: He had a real hand up.

CCW Chair: Oh, did he really? Community Member 7, do you want to come in?

Community Member 7: Community Member 12 hit the nail on the head, I was going to ask about best practice here and abroad, if the organisation's looking at those, and the answer is yes.

CCW Chair: Thank you so much. Just double-checking. If there's no other follow-ups to Question 3, then Sam, can I turn to you, again I don't think there were any actions that came out of that discussion, but any last comments before we move away from the Q&A session, Sam?

TMcK Facilitator: As with the other two Q&As, the response from John, Kerri and Douglas has been added to this and will be displayed in the summary report that you'll get sent. I guess the action, a slightly newer one or an evolution of what was said with regards to looking into water companies as best practice, we could formulate a bit of an action response there as well so that is tracked, and their ongoing relationship with communication there.

CCW Chair: Excellent. Thank you so much. So, we've come to the end of the session. I do have a few points to make, but can I just say thank you very much to community members for your participation and time, and of course thank you very much to John, Kerri and Douglas for your responses and engagement, of course.

In terms of the actions that you saw on the screen, they've been captured live, you've seen them, you've agreed them, and they will form the basis of South East Water's follow-up action plan.

Session transcript

In terms of next steps, a summary report, fully anonymised transcript and full list of actions will be published within seven working days, so I have here by Thursday 5th November. Before publication, session members will have the opportunity to request changes such as redaction of personal information. South East Water must publish this action plan within 28 working days, and I have here by Friday 4th December, setting out how it will deliver against the agreed actions. CCW will publish this on its website.

Once the action plan is published, community members will be sent a link and a short survey asking whether the plan accurately reflects what was agreed, and whether it's enough to address the concerns raised. You will 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.

If I could again thank everybody for your participation, your input is very valuable and we really appreciate you. Thank you again, and please enjoy the rest of your evening. Thank you, goodbye now.

[CLOSE]