

Vulnerability and Affordability Report

2017/18

Providing support for customers in vulnerable circumstances is more important than ever

Here's what we've done to help in 2017/18...

nearly
100,000
customers

received financial help with their bill

over
£10m
in support

funded by United Utilities to help customers with their bills

nearly
70%
increase

in customers registered for Priority Services

Here are some of the ways we've done it...

Continuing partnership working

Creating new ideas and learning better ways of working

Customer Advisory Panel

A voice for those customers in vulnerable circumstances

North West Affordability Summit

Collaborating to identify opportunities to make a difference

Priority Services data share trial

Enabling collaboration between the water and energy sectors

Help for those who need it most

This report lays out our framework for assisting customers in vulnerable circumstances, and the support we provide to customers who face challenges affording their water bill.

By publishing this report we hope to prompt further engagement with other service providers and organisations, plus promote open collaboration to improve the support that is offered to customers who need it most.

United Utilities provides vital water and wastewater services across the North West region. Like all service providers, we have a responsibility to assist our customers who can find themselves in vulnerable situations.

We have sought to benchmark the support we provide, looking beyond the water sector for examples of best practice. Increasingly, we are partnering and sharing with other organisations.

Here's what we've done in the last 12 months...



Continued and escalated our award winning Town Action Planning programme



An extra 20,000 customers on discounted tariffs



Completed a wholesale review of our customer communication material



33,500 customers helped with their water debt by matching payments pound for pound



Re-launched our customer website, putting accessibility at the heart of the new design



Increased use of third party data to engage those most likely to be in need of support



21,000 additional customers registered for Priority Services; a near 70% increase

Our affordability support



Setting an affordable but sustainable payment plan arrangement that is right for each individual is key. We look to ‘bundle’ schemes together to address historic debt and provide an affordable ongoing bill.

Our dedicated affordability team is trained to recognise signs of affordability challenges and better understand customers’ financial situation.

We have a long established commitment to building relationships with national and local money advice agencies, charities and voluntary organisations in the North West. Our agents can pass customers who are in debt to money experts such as National Debt Helpline, Citizens Advice, StepChange and Payplan.

Our financial assistance schemes:

Back on track	If a customer is behind with their water bills and is on benefits, we can help by fixing their bill at a lower level that they can afford
Help to pay	If a customer receives Pension Credit, we could move them onto a rate which better suits them, based on their income
Payment Matching Plus	For customers who’ve built up debt, for every £1 they pay we’ll match it to get the debt paid off twice as fast. After six months, for £1 they pay, we’ll pay £2
Payment Break	If a customer is struggling with their bill due to a temporary change in circumstances, such a change in benefit payments, we can help by delaying payments for a period of time
UU Trust Restart	Customers in real financial difficulty could qualify for a one-off grant from the UU Trust Fund, to help them clear their debts and start afresh
Water Direct	It can help some customers to budget for their bills by applying to the DWP to pay their bill direct from their benefits
WaterSure	If a customer on benefits has a water meter and uses a lot of water due to ill health or having a large family, the WaterSure scheme caps their annual bill



Details of all the ways we can help those struggling to pay their bills can be easily found at unitedutilities.com/help-and-support

Our vulnerability support

Vulnerability and its causes are often complex. Being aware of the reasons why a customer may be in these circumstances is important in understanding what support they need, and understanding whether this extra support is a permanent or temporary requirement.

We have designed our Priority Services support and registration process with advice from support agencies, making it as easy as possible for customers to sign up. In 2016 there were just over 20,000 customers registered with us. By March 2018 this had increased to over 52,000.

Our dedicated vulnerability support team has had training by organisations such as MIND, The Samaritans and Macmillan Cancer Support.

This year we introduced a new digital service called Recite Me; a toolbar that boosts accessibility of our online content, by increasing font sizes or changing background colours. It has read aloud capability for text and video, and can translate content into any one of 100 languages. We've also added more videos with both subtitles and sign language.

We have established robust operational processes to support sensitive customers living in non-household properties, such as care homes and hospitals, meaning we can easily identify those affected by a no water supply or water quality issue.

Our appropriately trained advisors offer customers support tailored to their needs:

Bottled water delivery in the event of prolonged disturbance to supply	Help with quarterly meter reading
Proactive communications during water supply issues or flooding	Nominee scheme
Braille, large print, coloured paper or audio bills and leaflets	Next Generation Text Service to help people with hearing loss
Choice of preferred mode of contact	Proactive bill and tariff review
Password scheme	Knock and wait protocol
Finance advice and guidance	Key language leaflets
Meter relocation	Translation service

“We are Priority Services registered customers due to our son’s disabilities. There was a local fault yesterday evening and we were notified by text, email and later a courtesy call. We also had an emergency supply of water delivered for which we are grateful. Really pleased with the extra mile you went, all without us contacting you once!”



Details of how we can help those who might benefit from additional support can be easily found at unitedutilities.com/help-and-support

Partnership working

Throughout the year we have been actively pursuing partnership working opportunities. Through partnerships we are accessing new information, learning from others, and creating new ideas.

Partnership working offers the potential to provide customers with levels of assistance and advice that we could never achieve on our own.



Our Customer Advisory Panel

In 2016 we helped establish the independent Customer Affordability and Vulnerability Advisory Panel. The panel provides insight and feedback to us on how best to engage and support customers in vulnerable circumstances, including those facing affordability challenges.

It acts as a voice for those customers who have traditionally found it difficult to raise concerns, due in part to the circumstances in which they find themselves.

The panel plays a key role in pushing us to deliver leading levels of support for customers in vulnerable circumstances, and is also working with us to co-design new services and interventions.

The panel has so far...



<p>Helped us shape new research studies to enhance our Priority Services proposition to customers</p>	<p>Identified practical opportunities for information sharing and cross-working with other organisations</p>	<p>Provided essential and critical feedback on our services in relation to hard to reach customer groups</p>	<p>Supported us in understanding why customers find themselves in vulnerable circumstances</p>	<p>Acted as a point of advice for YourVoice (the Uuw CCG) on affordability and vulnerability matters</p>
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North West Affordability Summit

#NWAffordability

In January 2018, we held our first North West Affordability Summit, bringing together representatives from a wide range of different sectors and communities with the collective goal of identifying new opportunities to make a difference.

This ground breaking event was attended by over 100 representatives from right across the North West, such as debt advice charities, food banks, DWP, Credit Unions, Councils, Housing Associations, MPs and other utility companies.

Exchanging ideas

The day facilitated the exchange of ideas and co-creation of potential solutions, recognising that collaborative partnerships can go beyond what any one organisation could do alone. Many ideas and actions were generated to be taken forward in partnership by those attending outside of the summit itself.

We collectively identified and developed five work streams of action, which is being led by a UU Customer Affordability and Vulnerability Advisory Panel member.

Progress is being tracked and reported regularly and the outcome of the activity will be highlighted at the next Affordability Summit – which is to be held on 21 January 2019 at Manchester Convention Centre Complex.



We're helping to bust water meter myths and spreading the word that customers could save money on their water bills with a meter.

The five work streams of action:

<p>North West Hardship Hub</p> <hr/> <p>Empowering the advice community to access all the support available for their clients</p>	<p>Metering Makes a Difference</p> <hr/> <p>Changing perceptions of meters in the North West and dispelling myths</p>	<p>Early Intervention</p> <hr/> <p>Proactively approaching and targeting customers before they fall into debt</p>	<p>Just About Managing</p> <hr/> <p>Providing solutions and options for customers before they fall into debt</p>	<p>Community Education</p> <hr/> <p>Educational support for our most deprived communities on budgeting at home</p>
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Priority Services data share

One of the most effective ways of identifying customers eligible for Priority Services is through sharing information with other organisations.

The energy sector has an established framework for data exchange across companies to keep and share Priority Services registers for the benefit of customers.

To enable learning and collaboration between the water and energy sectors – and to act as a ‘proof of concept’ for the wider industry – we have completed a ground breaking cross sector pilot between United Utilities and Electricity North West (ENW), rapidly trialling and testing new approaches to Priority Services data sharing and reporting.

The trial helped establish a fully aligned Priority Services framework for energy and water companies, that enables data on Priority Services customers to be shared (where consent is given) across sectors.

The trial has proved successful and in only three months the details of 2,000 Priority Services registrations were shared between United Utilities and ENW. Key findings highlighted the need to give customers confidence in the data sharing process to help boost consent rates.

We have now extended our trial under the industry-wide ‘One Priority Services Register by 2020’ initiative. This aims to deliver a national data share for Priority Services across the water and energy sector by 2020.



Our Priority Services data share trial started in January 2018.

When a customer asks to be added to our Priority Services register and we know they're also supplied by Electricity North West (ENW), we ask them if they would also like to be added to the equivalent register maintained by ENW.

This means customers will receive our full range of Priority Services support, and also be provided with additional help in the event of a power cut.

As long as the customer provides explicit informed consent, then their details are securely passed to ENW.

Similarly, ENW informs United Utilities of any new Priority Services registrations they receive in the North West of England.

Continuing to improve support

We have recently developed Business Plan proposals for 2020–25. Our plans can be found at unitedutilities.com/corporate. As part of our submission, we have set out our plans to improve the range and quality of the affordability and vulnerability support that we provide to customers.

We are proposing UU's largest ever bill reduction, £45 by 2025. We forecast that this reduction, plus growing household incomes, will support 250,000 customers moving out of water poverty by 2025.

We will substantially increase the level of tariff discounts provided to customers that remain in water poverty. By 2025 we will provide financial support sufficient to lift an additional 66,500 customers out of water poverty¹, over and above the 250,000 helped through falling bills.

We are introducing a new Lowest Bill Guarantee to boost confidence amongst customers that a water meter can work for them to reduce their water bill.

UU will provide £71m of support to over 152,000 customers a year through financial assistance schemes including discounted tariffs, UU Trust Fund grants, and Payment Matching Plus arrears allowance scheme.

We are trialling an online water usage report, which gives metered customers detailed information on their water usage, giving them the opportunity to reduce usage and putting them in control of their bills.

Our plan continues to develop our industry leading support for vulnerable customers, committing us to extending our Priority Services offering to over 105,000 customers, and improving the quality and scale of the support we provide.

We propose a new incentive for active identification and registration of those customers in need of support. Assurance on the quality of our Priority Services offering will be independently certified by the British Standards Institution.

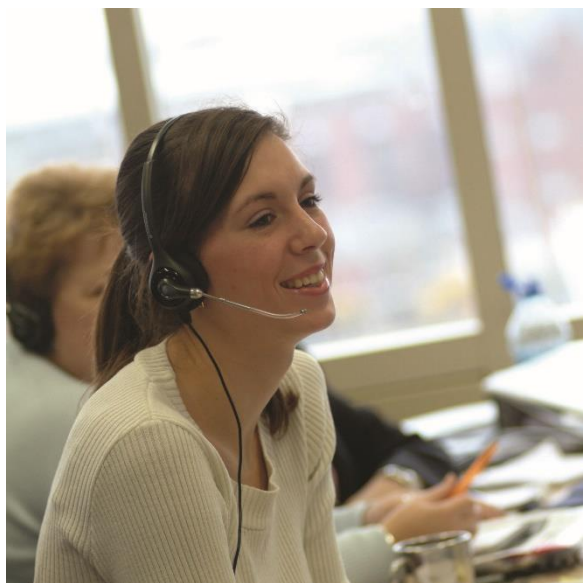
We have consulted on affordability and vulnerability impacts and mitigation plans with the customer challenge group for the North West, and made changes to our proposals based on their representations.

¹ Within our business plan we have adopted a standard definition of water poverty as 'spending 3% or more of household income after housing costs on water and sewerage bills'.



Get in touch

We want to share ideas and collaborate with others to make services to vulnerable customers even better. If you are part of a company or organisation that would like to work with us on this, then we want to hear from you.



If you would like more information or to register for Priority Services, please:

- visit our website: unitedutilities.com/priorityservices
- call us on **0345 072 6093**, any time of day or night

If you have a family member, friend or neighbour who might benefit from a little extra support, please let them know about Priority Services. It is completely free to our customers in the North West – and you don't have to be the named bill payer to benefit.



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