

# YourVoice

## Reflecting on United Utilities' performance – 2020/21

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**We, the YourVoice panel, have continued to work closely with United Utilities to review, challenge and monitor its performance on behalf of customers and stakeholders (those with an interest in the company).**

Although our meetings have been by video call rather than in person, we have continued to meet regularly, as a whole group and through subgroups used to focus on areas of concern. Our members include customer representatives, industry regulators, stakeholders, representatives of vulnerable communities, money advice services, and representatives from the charitable sector and public health services, so we have had a great overview of the effect of the company's work in the region.

It has been a very unusual and difficult year for all of us because of the COVID-19 pandemic. United Utilities has, however, continued to provide safe and reliable water to people in the North West and dispose of our wastewater safely and efficiently. Three out of four of United Utilities' employees are classed as key workers.

United Utilities was quick to review its social tariff and provide more support to help customers affected by the pandemic get financial help with their bills. United Utilities increased its financial support to people finding it difficult to pay their bills by adding £15 million to the five-year budgeted figure of £70 million. This has helped 45,000 customers this year.

Extra financial support provided by the company has lifted 71,000 customers out of water poverty. (A customer is in water poverty if they spend more than 3% of their household income on their water bill.)

United Utilities is a large landowner in the region and, as there has been a very large increase in the use of some of its recreational sites during the pandemic, the company has invested in improvement work to footpaths, signs and management services to allow more and better access to these areas for people who want to get outdoors and enjoy the countryside.

### 2020/21 overview

This is the first year of United Utilities' five-year business plan to 2025, which was widely discussed, researched and consulted on with customers and stakeholders. Many projects have begun, some are still in the planning or consultation stage, and some are almost finished. We receive reports on United Utilities' progress on this work programme and monitor the effects it has on customers.

We are pleased to report that in our view, United Utilities' 2020/21 Annual Performance Report accurately reflects the company's performance.

United Utilities continues to produce an easy-to-read performance summary, which has again received Plain English Campaign's Crystal Mark.

An interactive digital presentation is available online to help customers and stakeholders access and understand this information more easily. The company shares the main performance messages on social media in an attempt to reach more customers.

United Utilities' performance during the year shows both positives and negatives. It has met many of the increasingly challenging targets in its new 2020–25 business plan. However, it failed to meet just under 20% of its performance commitments.

We will continue to monitor the company to make sure it gives its performance in these areas the attention needed to improve and meet the targets in the future.

Customers have said they expect a high-quality, safe and reliable water supply which tastes and looks good. The company did not achieve its target on this commitment but plans to put in place an improvement programme in 2021/22, which will include more mains cleaning and flushing and a project to reline the water pipes from the Lake Vyrnwy treated-water aqueduct, alongside work to replace lead pipes from customers' properties. This work will help to reduce customers' concerns about the colour and taste of the water from their taps. It is important to say, however, that the water the company supplied to customers was very safe and that there was a 53% reduction this year in the time customers were without a water supply.

We were disappointed that United Utilities again did not meet its targets for reducing sewer flooding inside properties. Sewer flooding is one of the worst service failures that customers can experience and is a customer priority for improvement. The company was on track to meet its targets until extreme amounts of rain in June, August and October 2020, and Storm Christoph in January 2021, significantly increased flooding incidents. Work is ongoing to install a dynamic network management system to improve and monitor network performance and identify potential problems before they happen. The company is working more with the Environment Agency and local authorities to better co-ordinate its response to flooding and reduce flood risk. However, this is not an easy problem to solve, mainly due to the effects of changing weather patterns and the capacity of underlying infrastructure such as the sewer network, and this will continue to be one of the main areas we will monitor and challenge in the coming years.

The company's performance on sewer blockages (22,352 incidents) did not reach its target (20,664) but its performance should improve using the new network management system.

The company has eight performance commitments to improve the way it works to keep bills down and improve services, and last year it beat its target on each of these. Ongoing work to make sure everyone is billed for the water and wastewater services they receive has been successful and this helps make sure bills are fairer for all customers.

The Priority Services register now includes over 128,000 customers who get tailored help when needed, and the service has received a British Standard Institute accreditation. Ongoing messages to customers through as many communication channels as possible, alongside help and advice channels, continue to inform customers of 'what not to flush', what causes sewer blockages, and the need to use less water. There is some evidence that these messages are working, but they need to continue.

United Utilities continued to feel the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020/21. However, we were pleased to be kept fully informed about the company's progress throughout the year, and how it was adapting in order to keep providing services to customers. We support its actions, along with those of the rest of the water industry, to provide continued support for business customers and retailers and to promote its extended support tariffs for households struggling to pay their bills.

As ever, during the coming year we will continue to monitor and challenge the company on behalf of customers. If you would like to contact us about United Utilities' performance or our work, please email us at [myview@uuplc.co.uk](mailto:myview@uuplc.co.uk)

## **Bernice Law**

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July 2021