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Telephone: 01925 237000

unitedutilities.com

Our ref: EIR/ID752
Date: 30/03/2026
Email: EIRRequests@uuplc.co.uk

Dear [redacted],

Thank you for your email and your request for environmental information. We understand your concerns and appreciate your interest and want to let you know that your request has been carefully considered in accordance with the Environmental Information Regulations (EIR).

Your request:

I am writing to you today as a resident of port Carlisle and a customer of united utilities to formally express my deep concern and outrage regarding the management of sewage discharges into our waterways, particularly within the lake district and wider Cumbria area.

Having recently watched the investigative drama 'Dirty Business', I am profoundly shocked by the scale of untreated sewage being released into our local environment. As a bill-paying customer, I find it unacceptable that significant dividends and bonuses are prioritised while our unique world heritage landscape suffers from what appears to be a systematic failure in infrastructure.

I am specifically requesting a formal response on the following:

Local incident data:

I am aware of recent reports regarding significant discharges, including the 73-hour spill into the River Derwent and the 11-hour discharge at Whitehaven. Please provide the total spill hours for my specific postcode (CA7 5DA) for the last 12 months.

Lake Health:

What specific, accelerated measures are being taken to address the rising nutrient levels and blue-green algae blooms in Ullswater and Windermere? Given that phosphorous form sewage is a primary driver of this decline, your current investigation timelines, are in my view, insufficient.

Infrastructure vs. Dividends:

According to recent FO findings, united utilities reportedly underspend millions allocated for connecting non-mains systems to the sewer network in the Windermere catchment. I would like an explanation as to why this capital was not fully utilities to protect the lake.

Our response:

Local incident data:

United Utilities is committed to being transparent about its performance and provides data and information on how we are performing in respect of reducing discharges from storm overflows on our website: United Utilities - Better Rivers. This webpage provides some high level information about the work we have undertaken or are planning to undertake and includes a short video, setting out what we are doing to reduce spills.

The webpage also provides a number of links to more detailed information:

- The link on the better rivers webpage to the "storm overflow map", Storm overflow map | United Utilities - Better Rivers, takes you to a portal that provides real-time monitoring data. This portal shows the location of our storm overflows and indicates whether they are currently operating or whether they have operated in the last 24 hours. By clicking on any overflow, you are presented with a drop down box that provides information on any recent discharges and provides a link to the national storm overflow plan for England, where you can find out more about our future improvement plans for that overflow.
- The link to "our storm overflow performance", Storm overflow performance | United Utilities, takes you to a page that provides information about how water companies standardly measure, validate and report discharges to the Environment Agency (EA). This page also provides a pull down box that allows you to download the validated annual data that has been provided to the EA, as well as the currently validated data for recent months.

In specific response to your request for total spill hours for the CA7 5DA postcode, having checked our records, there are no storm overflows within your postcode area. The nearest one is Port Carlisle Pumping Station, which discharged for a total of 36:13:46 (hh:mm:ss) during 2025. To date, this asset has not discharged during 2026.

Lake Health:

Over the next five years, United Utilities has proposed the largest ever programme of investment in the Windermere catchment. We have C.£200m of planned delivery to upgrade treatment standards from wastewater treatment works and to create extra storage capacity to reduce spills from storm overflows.

This page on our website: Our action plan for Windermere provides full details of the work we will be undertaking in the Windermere catchment, with the link to the Wonderful Windermere Methodology Consultation setting out the work that we are doing to help others reduce sources of phosphorous and other nutrient inputs into Windermere.

Infrastructure vs. Dividends:

The recent newspaper reports that United Utilities has underspent its allocated expenditure on first time sewerage projects are partially correct, although this is not related to Dividend payments.

The level of expenditure that water companies are "allocated", is determined through the five-yearly price review process that is managed by Ofwat, the water industry regulator. This process sets an assumed overall level of water or wastewater total expenditure, for each five-year period, rather than providing a specific allocation for individual projects or programmes of work. The actual allocation and prioritisation of this expenditure is then for each water company to decide.

Since 2000, we have been allocated an assumed expenditure level of C.£129 million to respond to requests for first time sewerage connections to our networks, although in practice, we have only been able to spend C.£76.7 million on these connections, over this 25 year period.

Although we widely publicise and actively seek to promote the uptake of first time sewerage schemes, actual levels of customer uptake have been lower than we would have liked, and we are not legally able to force property owners to connect.

In making these assessments, we also have an obligation to consider what is in the best interest of the environment and customers. Section 101a of the Water Industry Act 1991, defines water company's obligations with respect to first time sewerage and this, together with the available guidance from the Environment Agency, makes clear that consideration needs to be given to a number of factors before it is appropriate to provide a FTS connection.

You can read more about our approach to first time sewerage and specifically how we are seeking to increase uptake within the Windermere area on our website: First Time Sewerage – Windermere Catchment Pilot Scheme | United Utilities. This link describes how we have set up a pilot scheme, which is designed to increase awareness, help us understand the community appetite and assess whether there are any barriers that might restrict applications or take-up. It also provides links to other pages that provide more detail on both the work in Windermere and on the first time sewerage programme more generally.

With regard to the impact of dividend payments on our investment programmes, we think it is useful to emphasise that dividend payments aren't made instead of improving our network, they're just part of how we fund these improvements. This is a complex technical point, but we have tried to set out why and how this is the case below.

As set out above, as part of the price review process Ofwat challenges water companies' investment proposals for the various programmes of work that they will need to implement and determines expenditure levels that are set out in terms in terms of total expenditure, "Totex", allowances. These totex allowances are then reflected within customer bills.

The totex investment that companies make can be considered as being either Operating Expenditure (Opex), or Capital Expenditure (Capex). Opex is the ongoing, day-to-day costs to run the business (e.g., energy for pumps, staff salaries, chemical costs for water treatment) and Capex is the money spent on building or upgrading long-term assets (e.g., new treatment plants, laying new water pipes, upgrading sewage systems).

In simple terms, Ofwat's assessment of efficient Opex needing to be spent by United Utilities is directly funded through customer bills, with the majority of Ofwat's assessment of efficient Capex being funded through borrowing, either debt or equity, with customer bills being used to fund the borrowing (through interest or dividend payments).

Dividends are the annual payment to equity investors in return for them providing capital to companies for its investments, much like interest is the annual payment to debt investors for their capital. A company must offer dividends to attract capital via equity much like it must pay interest if it wishes to attract capital via debt.

Full details of our investment and financial transactions are set out within each year's Annual Performance Report that we publish on our website. United Utilities Annual Performance Report.

Information about our expenditure and revenues starts on page 18 of the last (2024/25) Annual Performance Report with the table at the bottom of that page showing that over the last five year period, United Utilities actual Totex investment was £7.661bn, which was £1.339bn more than the value of £6.322bn that had originally been assumed by Ofwat and reflected in customers' bills.

This increased actual expenditure level demonstrates that United Utilities has not been paying dividends instead of investing in its asset base and why dividend payments aren't made instead of improving our network, they're just part of how we fund it.

We hope that this response answers your request. However, if you're not satisfied with how we've handled it, you can request an internal review. To do this, please write to us at Environmental Information Office, Haweswater House, Lingley Mere, Warrington, WA5 3LP or email us at EIRRequests@uuplc.co.uk, addressing your request to [redacted] and explaining why you're unhappy with our response. We'll be very happy to review your request and ensure we've done everything we can to assist you.

Any request for an internal review should be made within 40 working days of receipt of this response, and we will reply within 40 working days from receipt of the request for internal review.

Thanks