

YourVoice

Reflecting on United Utilities' performance – 2018/19

Over the last year the YourVoice panel have continued to work closely with United Utilities to make sure they deliver water and wastewater services which reflect the priorities of customers and stakeholders across the North West.

Our members include independent customer and business representatives, the Consumer Council for Water, quality and environmental regulators and champions for vulnerable customers. The insight these people bring to the panel is very helpful when challenging United Utilities to improve their performance for business and household customers.

Members of the panel have two roles over the current business plan period to 2020. Firstly, we challenge United Utilities to deliver the promises they made to customers in their business plan, and monitor their progress against their performance commitments and how they are reporting on these commitments. Secondly, we challenge United Utilities in preparing their business plan for 2020-25, to make sure it was developed with a thorough understanding of customer and stakeholder views and needs. To help us carry out these roles, we use subcommittees to look in detail at United Utilities' proposals and review and challenge them as appropriate. We have direct contact with the United Utilities' board and the executive team in this work.

During the year from April 2018 to March 2019, we increased the frequency of our meetings with the company. We have regularly received and reviewed progress reports from United Utilities which show how they are performing against their customer promises, and their performance commitments for customers. We also emphasised how important it is for all those who live and work in the North West to be able to easily understand how the company are performing.

We are pleased to report that United Utilities' 2018/19 Annual Performance Report accurately reflects their performance. They are continuing to produce an easy-to-read performance summary, which has gained Plain English Campaign's Crystal Mark. They are also publishing extra information on their website, which provides a more interactive digital presentation of the information to help to improve how customers and stakeholders access and understand the information.

We are encouraged that United Utilities are continuing with their efforts to share the main messages from their reporting on social media and using advertising so more people receive this information.

In terms of their performance during the year, results show both positives as well as negatives. It is good to report that, for many targets, their performance has improved year on year, and they have used lessons they have learnt from past events to effectively manage the effects of the hot, dry summer of 2018. However, we have continued to question and challenge them to make improvements where they have not met their targets. One example of this is in the area of the Water Quality Services Index, which is an important measure for customers. Water quality remains very good, but the company received complaints from customers about discoloured water, and this affected their performance score. They responded by putting in place an extensive mains cleaning programme. They had to suspend this work during the very dry summer in 2018, as flushing out the water pipes uses a lot of water. This work has started again and will hopefully improve water quality for customers in the future.

United Utilities' performance on the sewer flooding target, which has been below target previously, is pleasing, although the weather did contribute to this. Customers see this target as a priority, so we will continue to monitor their performance against it as the year goes on.

The company's overall performance in 2018/19 meant they received £19million as a result of the outcome delivery incentives (penalty and outperformance payments) that they agreed with Ofwat (their economic regulator) for this five-year period. This reflects their improved performance, particularly in customer service and environmental measures.

We have spent a lot of time in the last year reviewing and challenging United Utilities' work on the next price review (PR19). We were closely involved in attending and monitoring some innovative customer research and making sure their business plan reflected the results of that research and customers' views. We worked on issues such as future operational plans, making sure there is a robust and reliable water supply for Manchester and the Pennines, project costs, performance commitments for 2020-25, and how all of these will affect bills in the next business plan period up to 2025. We challenged the company on their ambition and compared their proposed performance (for example, on reducing leaks) with that of other water companies.

Overall, we are pleased that over recent years customers have become much better informed and more willing to challenge and demand improvements in service. We continue to work with United Utilities to give customers more information on their work, and we will continue to make sure their plans effectively reflect customers' feedback.

Over the last year we have seen United Utilities increase the work they do with customers on affordability and vulnerability. The number of people who have signed up for Priority Services in the year shows that more people are now receiving tailored help when they need it, which is a welcome development. The company have introduced more financial support schemes, such as 'Help to pay' and 'Back on track', to help customers who have difficulty paying their water bills, and have once again put forward financial support for these schemes.

Initial indications are that targets for 2020-25 will be very challenging and 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.

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Clarity approved by
Plain English Campaign