



Water Quality Messaging Research Report

May 2024

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Background, sample, and research context

Background

United Utilities supplies over 7 million people and 200,000 businesses with clean water via 42,000 kilometres of pipes.

United Utilities sometimes supply customers in a different way due to a range of reasons, including maintenance work and moving the water around their integrated network at times of drought or dry weather to ensure supply-demand. This may mean that United Utilities use and blend water from another treatment works which processes water from a different source.

As a result, some customers in pockets across the North West may see an impact on the taste, smell and appearance of their tap water, for example tea and coffee may taste slightly different and soap could lather differently.



United Utilities may contact customers impacted by these changes through a variety of channels, including letter, email and text.

United Utilities has previously commissioned water quality research connected to drinking water changes due to the North West Transfer (NWT).

The focus of this project was the testing of communications in 'hotspot' areas where there has been a permanent or variable change in the water, and in 5 regional 'control' areas where no water blend change has been experienced.

Objectives

The overall purpose of the research is to *'co-create the ideal messaging, tailored to specific audiences, with the aim of enhancing customer acceptability of water supply changes'*. More specifically the research objectives are:

1. Explore customer views of existing materials used to communicate these changes, understanding the language, tone and information presented
2. Understand customer preferences on the channel of communications, such as social media, letter or email
3. Understand variances of these views between customers depending on their experience, region (5 county) and current water source
4. Understand whether customer perception of United Utilities changes during the water supply change process
5. Explore customer perceptions of the various reasons for water supply changes (eg, resilience vs maintenance work), as well as the longevity
6. Explore customer concerns regarding water supply changes, and the reasons behind them (eg, loss aversion, concerns over drinking water quality and side effects on taste/smell/appearance and health)

From end to end, this research is underpinned by behavioural science, starting off with a United Utilities staff workshop aimed at providing the project team with the tools required to design comms to test in the sessions.

Ofwat standards for high quality research

Ofwat have set out requirements for High Quality Research in their Customer Engagement Policy. All water company research and engagement should follow best practice and lead to a meaningful understanding of what is important to customers and wider stakeholders.

Useful and contextualised

This research was conducted in order to explore customer views of existing materials used to communicate water supply changes, with the aim of increasing acceptability and reducing contacts. The research was contextualised using previous materials and research in this area. The process centred on co-creation of materials with United Utilities' customers and will be used to adapt a final set of communications relating to temporary and permanent blend changes.

Fit for purpose

Cognitive testing and a pilot stage was carried out to ensure subject matter was presented in a way which was as understandable and engaging as possible for respondents, and allowed them to make meaningful contributions to the co-creation exercise.

Independently assured

All research was conducted by DJS, an independent market research agency. United Utilities collaborated with Your Voice, the Independent Challenge Group, who had sight of all the research materials and fieldwork and had an opportunity to check and challenge.

Continual

Prior to, as well as at the outset of this research, previous insights and learnings regarding water blend change communications were reviewed as part of a process of continual learning. Customer views will be directly fed into the final communications for water blend changes, and will provide a suite of messages to be used for future events. The behavioural science levers will also be applied across other communications outside of a blend change.

Inclusive

A mix of online and face-to-face fieldwork was conducted to ensure that customers classed as digitally vulnerable and hard-to-reach were included in the research. Online depth interviews also meant those who didn't feel comfortable in group situations were encouraged to participate, as well as the offer of a telephone or in-person interview to adapt to vulnerable customers' preferences.

Neutrally designed

Every effort has been made to ensure that the research is neutral and free from bias. Where there is the potential for bias, this has been acknowledged in the report. Participants were encouraged to give their open and honest views and reassurances were given throughout the research that United Utilities were open to hearing their honest opinions and experiences.

Ethical

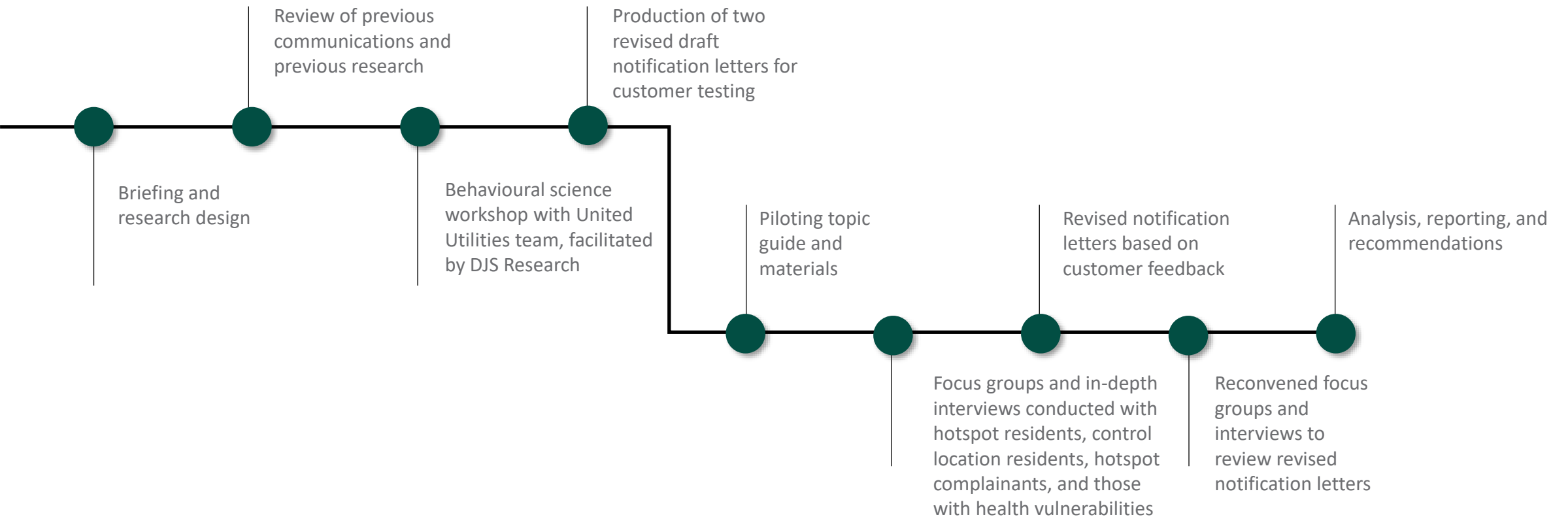
This research was conducted by DJS Research who are a member of the Market Research Society. Participants were regularly reminded that they could be open and honest in their views due to anonymity, and DJS and United Utilities were subject to strict data protection protocols.

Shared in full with others

The full final report and research materials will be shared on the United Utilities' research library webpage and through their industry newsletter The Source.

Project lifecycle

The project was undertaken as an iterative process of design, testing, re-design, and re-testing.



Detailed methodology



Following the staff workshop, two phases of customer research commenced:

Initial focus groups (April 24th to May 9th)

- 8 x face-to-face focus groups lasting 2 hours.
- 3 conducted in 'hotspot areas' – Southport and Fylde* (where there has been a variable change) and Lightshaw (where there has been a permanent change).
- 5 'control' groups conducted in each of the UU regions – Trafford (pilot group), Penrith, Liverpool, Crewe and Lancaster.
- Groups varied in terms of their demographic makeup i.e. by age, socioeconomic status and customer type (bill payers and non-bill payer).

Initial depth interviews (May 3rd to May 20th)

- A mix of 12 online and face-to face depth interviews conducted with complainants across the 3 hotspot areas
- Representation of customers with health vulnerabilities across the groups and depths .

Reconvened groups/depths (May 21st to 24th)

- 3 x one-hour online focus groups (2 with participants from the control areas and 1 with those from the hotspot areas).
- 5 x 30 minute online depths with complainants.

In total 67 customers participated in focus groups and a further 16 took part in an in-depth interview.

*Low attendance at the Fylde group (4) was boosted with 4 in-depth interviews.



Detailed methodology

Complainant interviews

Participants were drawn from a sample frame provided by United Utilities detailed over the page. This sample frame consisted of individuals who were resident in one of the three ‘hotspot’ areas and who had made contact with United Utilities about certain characteristics of their water (i.e., hardness) across the time that their local water source change took place.

The context for their contact was confirmed at the point of recruitment and discussed in more detail during the interview.

Comparative analysis

Analysis was undertaken to compare subgroup variations (e.g., regional, health vulnerability) and, where clear and meaningful, this has been discussed in the body of the report. However, to a large extent, reactions and needs were consistent across the regions.

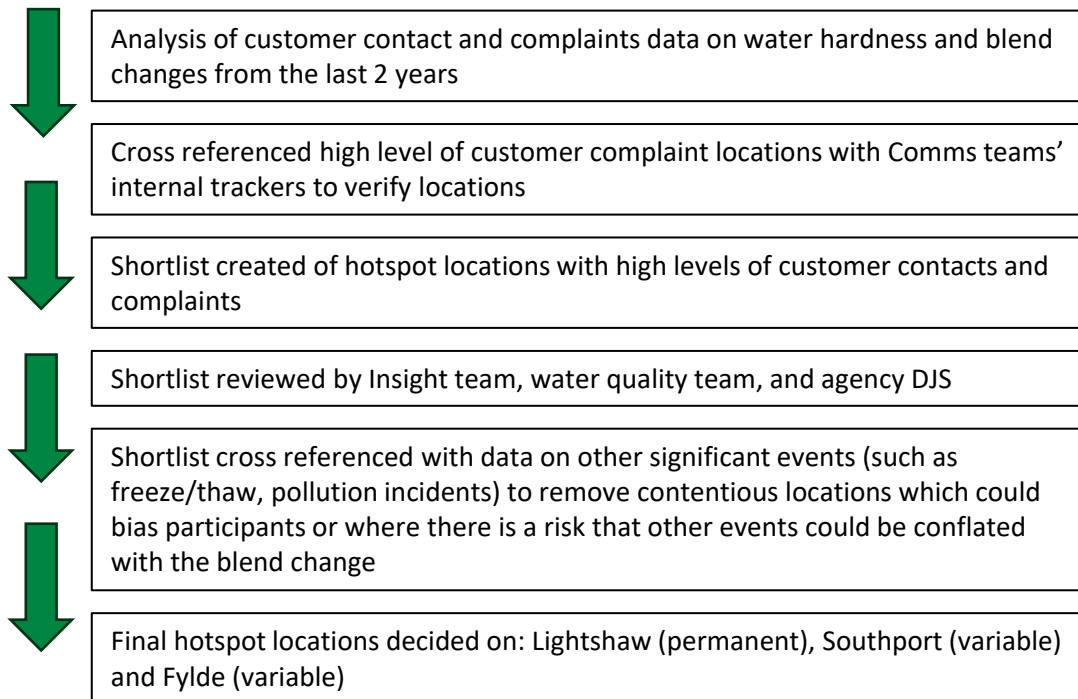


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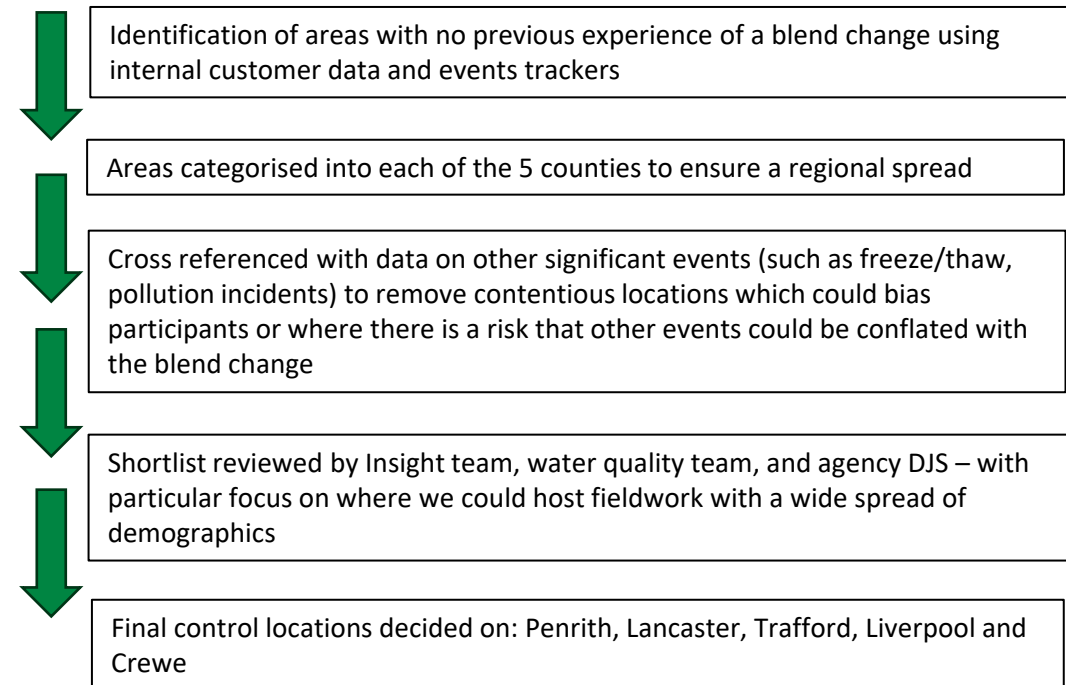
Location Decision Making Breakdown

The hotspot and control locations were chosen through analysis of water quality contact data, to enable the fieldwork to take place in areas with the most beneficial and relevant insight.

Hotspot



Control



Context

The following events happened before or during fieldwork and may have influenced customers answers.

BBC · 20d

Untreated sewage illegally pumped into Windermere

Since March 2023, media coverage surrounding the health of our seas and rivers has increased. In December, the BBC's Panorama focused on untreated sewage being pumped in the sea at Blackpool.

On 15th May it was widely reported that untreated sewage was being deposited into Lake Windermere.

"Pumping sewage into Windermere that makes you lose trust in their methods"

Penrith control group.

In February 2023, United Utilities announced that 2023/24 bills would see a 6.4% increase.

Since then, the financial struggles of Thames Water, future increases in water bills to fund infrastructure upgrades and water company profits have hit the headlines.

MailOnline · 7d

It's not just Devon with contaminated water: cryptosporidium parasite has been found across the UK... and if you're hoping to...

Whilst not the subject of recent news coverage, many research participants reported leaks and/or surface flooding in their local areas. Their perceived 'wastage' of water negatively influenced their reactions to United Utilities changing their water supply.

At the tail end of the research, the Cryptosporidium outbreak in Devon was reported nationally.

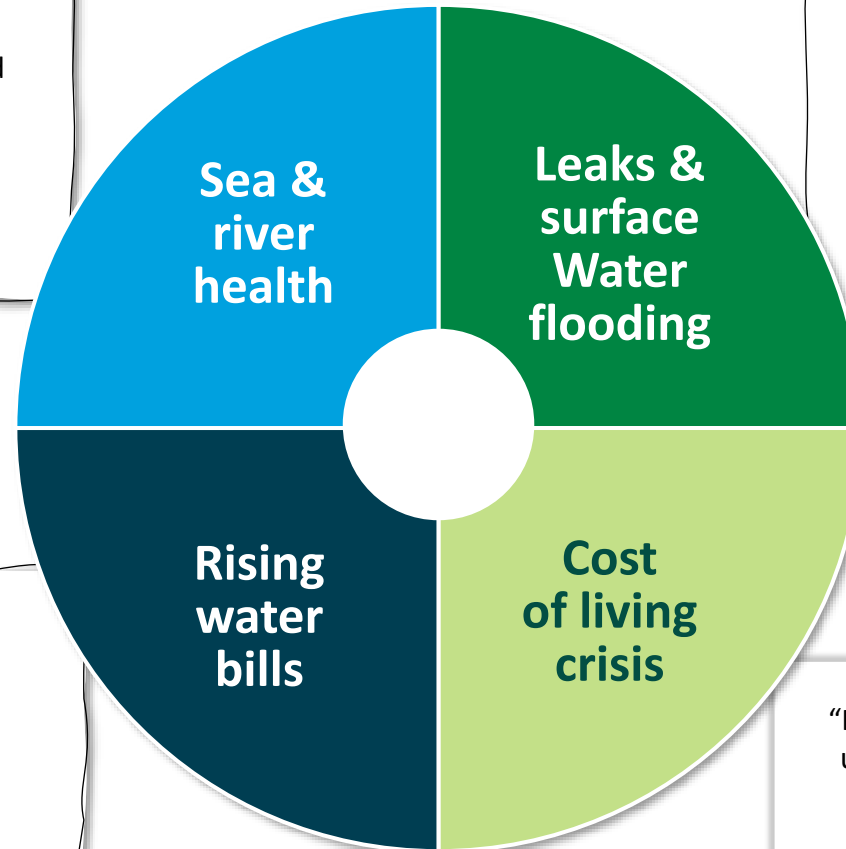
Since late 2021, a large proportion of the UK population have experienced the effects of the cost-of-living crisis.

"It represents their underinvestment strategy."

Crewe control group

"The word 'efficient' makes you think they are doing it to be cost efficient."

Penrith control group



‘Where the mind goes’: initial reflections on the materials in a behavioural science context

‘Where the mind goes’

Despite years of research demonstrating how flawed this notion is, even today many decisions are made based on the assumption that humans are these consistently rational beings that have perfect information, unlimited cognitive abilities and consistent preferences.

As a simple illustration of how unhuman this portrayal is, let’s consider the value we place on water. Picture yourself right now, reading this report; how much would you be willing to pay for a bottle of water?

Now, picture yourself stranded in a desert succumbing to ferocious heat; now how much would you be willing to pay for a bottle of water?

Were the amounts the same?
It’s unlikely.

The point is, the decision you ultimately make can be entirely different depending on your level of thirst – the opposite of a consistent preference.

Hunger, temperature, time of day, emotional state, past experience – the list goes on, but these are all contextual factors that impact on the way we perceive situations every single day.

What’s interesting though is that because perception feels so natural and straightforward for us as human beings it’s easy to assume that everything that we communicate to consumers will be perceived in exactly the way we intended.

Or, put another way, it’s reductive to think that if we simply write to customers and tell them their water is going to come from a different source, that there is nothing to worry about.

The truth is not so straight forward. There are many mechanisms for this, but one which is worth considering is association, which is expanded on overleaf.





Our associative machines

When trying to understand customers' attitudes and perceptions, a good starting point is to recognise that Homo sapiens' brains are associative machines. Over time, we build an associative memory of connections as things repeatedly occur.

For instance, imagine catching the scent of freshly baked cookies, evoking memories of your grandmother's kitchen from your childhood. The aroma of the cookies becomes intertwined with the experiences of love, laughter, and family associated with that kitchen.

Similarly, this associative effect elicits expectations that mould our subjective perception of an experience or a company communication, often without our conscious awareness of its influence.

In other words, whilst perception serves as the conduit for our experiences, it differs from a camera in that it does not objectively document reality.

This is as true for cookies as it is for water company comms.

Even if United Utilities performed perfectly, it still exists within an industry that is being painted in an extremely negative light right now by different actors (e.g., media, politicians etc.).

As you see on the next few slides, the following events happened before or during fieldwork and may have influenced customers answers by way of association, tying United Utilities to any number of the following:

- Sea and river health
- Cost of Living Crisis
- Rising water bills
- Leaks and surface water flooding

The reverse halo effect is a cognitive tendency claiming that negative impressions of people, brands, products etc in one area influence our feelings in another area.

In other words, the economy and industry wide negative sentiment and media coverage may be impacting customers' perceptions of the comms.

"I would have expected immediately that they were doing it for economic reasons rather than practical ones."

Penrith control group

"I'm skeptical. It shows a failing system..."

Crewe control group



Our associative machines: some examples

In the focus group sessions, participants were asked how they felt on reading the first drafts of the water blend change letters. Below are some examples of how for some participants, their views of the letters were influenced (sometimes incorrectly) by external factors.

EXAMPLE 1



This gentleman mistakenly jumps to the conclusion that this is a cost saving exercise for United Utilities based on media coverage of other water companies struggling financially. He feels that groundwater is finite and that we will end up with water shortages as a result.

"It worries me considerably that you would change to a source of water that will deplete. We've seen this in other parts of the country in the UK where it's been tried and it almost represents the underinvestment strategy and it's not something that's happened by accident. This smacks of desperation to continue supply while the business runs down."

Crewe control group

EXAMPLE 2



This lady has experienced an abnormally high number of water and wastewater related events recently, so she feels that if she was to receive the permanent letter that this would be the 'final straw' and she would relocate.

"I might even move to be honest...there's been a few leaks...everything that was green is now tarmacked and the marina, at least 3 or 4 times a year, is flooded and you have to pump out the water from the houses near me; the road is not passable and when you go for a walk with the dog the water is foaming, there's stuff in it that shouldn't be and if that's not clean, what else is not clean?"

Crewe control group

EXAMPLE 3



This lady ties the need for a water source change to stories about Windermere in the media, with the erroneous presumption that United Utilities are having to act after spoiling current supplies.

"Why are you changing it? Okay, I get it, it's about safeguarding the future of the water. But what this makes me wonder is, 'well, you've messed up our water sources. So, is that why you're now switching us to somewhere else?' And I would be very negative about that. So, there's a problem with Windermere and now you're telling me that you're going to change the source completely... hold on a minute. There's something going on here"

Trafford control group

Customer experience & perceptions of their current supply

Experience of United Utilities

Prior service experiences with United Utilities impact customers' reactions to the water quality comms.

A significant number of participants had contacted United Utilities. Contacts ranged from leaks, blocked drains and pipes, to low pressure and bills.

Most queries were handled well, positively impacting individuals' perceptions of United Utilities.

Communication is key to a successful outcome, with a lack of communication often the driver of dissatisfaction.

Often these associations with United Utilities impact customers views of the communications tested, the extent to which they trust what United Utilities is saying and their belief that United Utilities will deliver the work effectively.

Those who have not had contact with United Utilities tend to be aware of the media coverage on water companies and, as seen on previous slides, this too has an impact.

“We had a water outage, a couple of days ago and there were people all over Facebook saying what the hell's going on? But I got a message from United Utilities to tell me it was off. I didn't even realise it had gone off, which I thought was incredibly good. And then they also told me when it came back on again. It was quite dirty when it did come back on, but they said that was to be expected. It wasn't there was nothing wrong with it., so I thought the communication was really good.”

Lancaster control group

“The pressure on the estate is really, really low and United Utilities have been good at keeping us up to date with text messages.”

Lightshaw hotspot group

“I feel frustrated because the leak itself has been there for about 10 years and about every 9 months somebody comes out to fix it and within days, sometimes the same day it's leaking again. I get frustrated as so much water is being wasted.”

Crewe control group

“I find them very silent, I never really know they're there and I have to contact them always...if I hadn't gone online I'd never have seen my direct debit was increasing, I had no notification.”

Crewe control group

Perceptions of current supply

The majority of participants across the hotspot and control groups are happy with their water quality, with those in the hotspot areas generally not noticing a change.

The majority drink their water straight from the tap, whilst a minority filter it either through the fridge or a filter jug, due to a preference for the taste of filtered water, the convenience of it or down to health concerns. A handful boil and cool their water before they drink it.

Those drinking straight from the tap are complimentary about their water, claiming it is superior in quality to water they drink elsewhere (especially 'down South') and there is a wide-spread recognition that the water in the North West is softer than many other parts of the country and viewed as qualitatively 'better' as a result.

Those in Southport and Fylde have not really noticed any changes to their water, though, some participants in the Lightshaw group had noticed fluctuations in taste.

Reflecting previous research, customers in Cumbria showed greater knowledge about their water sources, as well as a greater emotional and economic investment in them.

"There have been times where it's tasted very different, quite metally and not very nice to drink, but we've had updates, because people obviously made the complaint to United Utilities and they looked into it and we've had text updates to say they're improving the water quality."

Lightshaw hotspot group

"I've done the filter before but it wasn't collecting anything of note and didn't taste any different so I gave up."

Crewe control group

"I look forward to it actually when I've been away."

Crewe control group

"I just like it tastes better than anywhere, well apart from Scotland, that is. In some parts of Scotland it is, you know, obviously very good as well, but it's up there with the with the best."

Lancaster control group

"We kind of take it for granted that we have good water up here. I mean, you go to London and 'Oh Christ, it's awful'."

Lightshaw hotspot group

"The main thing is here, why there's a lot of [people who come here]... It's a beautiful area and that brings a lot the large proportion [of the area's income]. If you're going to destroy something like Windermere and make no concessions for how you can improve things and the livelihoods dry up. Yeah. It's a big thing."

Penrith control group

Drivers to contact/complain

Reasons for contact

Whether the customer had prior warning of the source change or not, contact was made because their water dipped below their personal taste tolerance. For some, noticing a dramatic shift in taste characteristics prompted secondary fears about water safety.



“Maybe if enough people complain, they might put it back?”
Lightshaw contact

“Our washing machine broke for the third time since moving in and I thought, “why are we doing this?”. The cost of our water is going up for an inferior service!”
Southport contact

“Until you taste it, you can’t complain with any authority, [so] I didn’t do anything until it changed.”
Lightshaw contact

Emotions...

Anger	Worried
Disappointment	Scared
Frustration	Nonchalant
Annoyed	Exasperated
Unhappy	Cautious
Disgusted	Resigned
Upset	Concerned
Anxious	Distressed

What did they hope to achieve?

For most, more information at the time of the water source change would not necessarily have been enough to prevent their contact, especially for whom their water taste and hardness had dropped significantly below their personal acceptability threshold.

However, for those who simply wanted reassurance of the timescales involved, the safety of the drinking water throughout the process, or who wanted practical advice regarding countering the effects of the change, it's likely that some will find a more information rich set of communications enough to prevent contact with United Utilities.

Often customers decided to 'wait and see' whether they could live with the new water before making contact.



Knowledge that their water was still safe to drink. In particular, the fear that the process of changing the qualities of the water might involve introducing chemicals into the system prompted them to seek reassurance



To receive practical advice on countering the effects (e.g., whether it was possible to purchase filters or other products)



To find out how long the source change would last



To find out whether United Utilities could offer money or products (as above) to counter the effects of the source change. For instance, to offset the cost of buying filters, bottled water, or descaling products



Many ultimately wanted the water source to be returned back to normal. However, few were confident that this was a possibility



Few thought they could directly impact the decision behind the source change and, where they did, they saw their own complaint as part of a wider body of local action (e.g., mass complaints, notifying local MP)

Awareness/assessment of blend change communications

Communications were not well remembered. However, where they were missing, this often led to anxiety caused by having to piece together the picture with the fragments of information they have.

Awareness of prior communications is low, even amongst complainants from Lightshaw where communications, such as emails and letters, were issued to customers.

Low awareness of the work happening lead to a degree of confusion about what was going on in their area.

Those aware of communications struggled to recall them. Typically, they felt that the materials were simple but did the job. None stated that the materials themselves caused any acute concerns.

However, without these communications, customers were often left to their own assumptions about what work was being carried out on their local supply, which left much greater room for anxiety.

For instance, one customer had started to receive much harder water, causing her to be unable to drink or bathe in her water. Her interpretation of the situation was that work was being undertaken in response to this (rather than as a cause).

With no other information to go on, she became anxious that United Utilities were flushing the system with dangerous chemicals and was angry that, if this was the case, she had not been informed.

Case study example

- Woman in her early 60s was first alerted to an extreme change in her water hardness, that lasted 6-7 weeks, by limescale deposits building up in her kettle and the taste becoming unpalatable.
- After this period, her supply returned to a state that was, in fact, much better than it was prior to the period of harder water, as she had always suffered from murky water.
- She had received a letter from UU, but felt that it contained little information about what was actually happening.
- In the absence of clear information at the time, she (mistakenly) believed that:
 1. The work had been undertaken to rectify the hard water issue, she presumed by using chemicals to clean the pipe network
 2. This had exposed her to dangerous chemicals in her drinking water
- Her anger and complaint were generated by this fear.

Minimising contacts

Providing information to affected residents ahead of a water blend change is likely to help reduce future contacts. However, it is likely to have little impact in cases where the change in water quality falls substantially below an individual's acceptability threshold.

Informing residents of the reasons behind a water source change is likely to have the core benefit of reducing contacts (especially if the communications include local references, e.g. the name or location of the new water source).

Such information will prevent individuals assuming their own narrative in the absence of unclear or no correct information thus leading them to contact United Utilities.

For example:

- anxiety about unsafe chemicals being used as part of the water change process
- that the water source changes are a result of sewage overflows in their old water source
- cynicism about United Utilities taking such action to decrease costs and boost profits.

Complainants provided specific examples of information that they felt they would have found reassuring or useful at the time of their contact, although, in many cases, this was unlikely to prevent contact entirely.

- Practical advice for softening/filtering their water
- An option to 'report' poor quality water or speak to someone on the water blend change project team who can reassure them with specific answers rather than leave them feeling 'fobbed off' with generic advice or reassurances
- Give them access to information that is detailed enough for them to have a broad understanding of what is happening, what they can expect from their water, and reassurances that they're safe to continue
- Detail on when it will end (if temporary)

Minimising contacts

Linking back to what complainants hope to achieve when contacting United Utilities, it is possible to produce answers on the top 4 in a letter and on the website.

Knowledge that their water is still safe to drink



To receive practical advice on countering the effects (e.g., whether it was possible to purchase filters or other products)



To find out how long the source change would last



To find out whether United Utilities could offer money or products (as above) to counter the effects of the source change



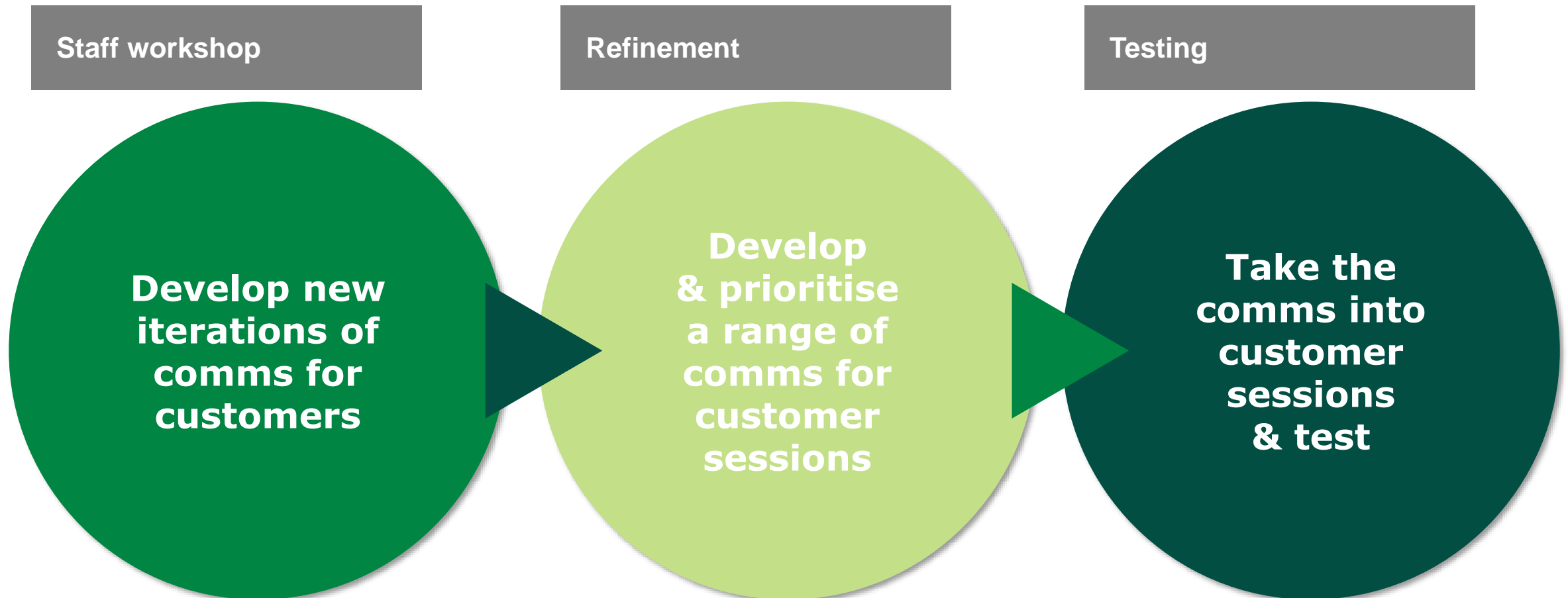
For the water source to be returned back to normal



Developing the first draft materials

Workshop journey & goals

Prior to the customer research, a staff workshop was held to provide valuable insights into human behaviour and to enhance the project team's understanding of customers' (psychological) needs and decision-making processes. This was followed by further refinement sessions to develop a range of comms, leveraging behavioural levers, for testing in the customer sessions.



Selected behavioural science levers

Homo sapiens' brains tend to come pre-programmed to experience how information is presented in predictable ways and behavioural science has converted much of this programming into a useful vocabulary of levers that can be used to describe human tendencies that recur time and time again.

Alongside the staff workshop, United Utilities' past archive of research reports was explored with various pieces examined. This gave rise to several psychological tendencies that had been found to recur. In addition, a rapid literature review was undertaken in order to supplement the findings from the internal exercise. This resulted in a final list of psychological principles that have been found to be relatively robust when it comes to influencing perceptions and behaviour.

<i>Lever...</i>	<i>Definition...</i>
Messenger	We are heavily influenced by <i>who</i> is communicating information
Losses	The pain of losing is (often) psychologically twice as powerful as the pleasure of gaining
Gains	In certain contexts, telling people what they'll gain can have powerful effects
Social norms	We are heavily influenced by what <i>others</i> do
Salience	Our attention is drawn to things that stand out!
Affect	Our actions can be powerfully shaped by our emotional associations
Expectation	Uncertainty is really uncomfortable for the human brain – seek ways to eliminate the feeling
Transparency	The inclusion of windows into your company's process so customers can see the effort that's going into what you do

Behavioural science levers

These principles or levers have been integral to this piece of research. They have guided United Utilities' development of communications to be tested and they have been woven into the questioning about the communications. Throughout this report, the reader will see the following icons to depict each of the levers.



Messenger



Social norms



Salience



Expectation



Losses



Gains



Affect



Transparency

Communications tested in first groups and depths

Following the behavioural science workshop and using the guidance provided by DJS Research, the team from United Utilities developed two revised notification letters that better adhered to the eight behaviour influencing ‘levers’.

One letter communicated a permanent water supply change and the other, a variable change. Four variations of each letter were produced with a different signatory on each. These were: A – Chief Scientific Officer; B – CEO; C – Customer Services Manager; D – Chief Engineer. Variations were rotated across the groups, all control group participants saw a variable and permanent version and hotspot participants saw the letter relevant to their water supply change i.e. Southport and Fylde – variable and Lightshaw – Permanent. **Please note, the scenarios presented in the letters are mocked up for the purposes of the research and do not describe real water blend change plans.**

Permanent letter A

United Utilities Water Limited
 PO Box 403
 Chorlton
 WA5 1TE
 Telephone 0345 673 723
 unitedutilities.com

Water for the North West

Hello

We're having to make some changes to your water

As part of our long-term plans, our teams regularly carry out a range of maintenance and improvement projects on the pipes and infrastructure that makes up the water network across the North West. This helps safeguard and support homes, businesses and new development in areas of [insert location] a way that also balances the needs of the environment. We do this so we can protect the supply of quality water, for now and future generations, in the face of demands such as climate change and population growth.

[call out box]
 Your water source will change from [insert date]. You do not need to do anything and there will be no interruption to your supply.

Our next stage of work

From [insert date], and continuing through to [insert date] we'll begin the next phase of our work which will help to ensure you have quality drinking water now and in the future. This will involve making some changes to the source of water we supply to you.

We'll be using one of our other drinking water sources/treatment sites and re-routing your water from different treatment works and along different pipes. This will make the network more efficient and the right size to meet demand in the area.

What will the changes mean for you?

Once the work is completed, your water will be supplied from a different drinking water source (called an aquifer). A lot of mineral bottled water is sourced from aquifers. Water from underground aquifers tends to have a higher mineral content as it has passed through layers of rock, before being pumped to the surface, treated and then distributed into the pipe network. Check out the diagram below to see how an aquifer works.

Figure 1 Image of an aquifer

United Utilities Water Limited
 Registered in England & Wales No. 2386728 Registered Office: Waterside House, Linghe Moss Business Park, Linghe Moss Avenue, Great Sankey, Warrington, WA5 3UF

Variable letter A

United Utilities Water Limited
 PO Box 403
 Chorlton
 WA5 1TE
 Telephone 0345 673 723
 unitedutilities.com

Water for the North West

Hello

We're having to make some changes to your water to help safeguard it for the future

As part of our long-term plans, our teams regularly carry out a range of maintenance and improvement projects on the pipes and infrastructure that makes up the water network across the North West. This is to help safeguard and support homes, businesses and new development in areas of [insert location] a way that also balances the needs of the environment. We do this so we can protect the supply of quality water, for now and future generations, in the face of challenges such as climate change and population growth.

[call out box]
 Your water source will temporarily change from [insert date] while we carry out work in your area. You do not need to do anything and there will be no interruption to your supply.

Our next stage of work

We're writing to let you know that we will be taking the treatment works which usually supplies your water offline so that our teams can carry out equipment maintenance and replace pumps. The work is expected to start during work commencing [insert date] and take around [insert timeframe] to complete.

Once all our work is completed, we'll then revert back to supplying you with water from your usual treatment works.

What will the changes mean for you?

Whilst the maintenance work is ongoing, we'll be using one of our other drinking water sources or treatment sites. Your water is currently moderately soft and will temporarily change to moderately hard as a result.

United Utilities Water Limited
 Registered in England & Wales No. 2386728 Registered Office: Waterside House, Linghe Moss Business Park, Linghe Moss Avenue, Great Sankey, Warrington, WA5 3UF

How quickly you may start to receive a change in your water is dependent on usage and where you live. Due to a variety of factors we cannot give you a precise timeframe of when your water will be impacted, however you will see the changes in the next coming months.

Whatever the source or treatment works, the drinking water we supply is treated and constantly monitored throughout its journey, from its source right through to taps to ensure it's clean and safe-meeting strict standards set by the Drinking Water Inspectorate.

While many customers may not notice a difference in their drinking water, those that do sometimes notice:

- A change in taste and appearance of hot and cold drinks
- Soap lathering differently

If you have any devices such as dishwashers, medical devices which use water or keep reptile, fish or aquatic species, please visit unitedutilities.com/your-water-supply for more information on how this may affect you.

We're here to help

If you have any queries about the changes you can find further information at unitedutilities.com/your-water-supply or give our customer services team a call on 0345 673 723 quoting project number 80060750.

Thank you
 Charmian Abbott
 Chief Scientific Officer

Customer feedback on first draft materials

Initial reactions

On reading the letter, reactions varied depending on whether the letter was communicating a permanent or variable supply change, with the permanent change raising more concerns.

Permanent letter

Reassured **Uncertain** Irritated
 Corporate **Informed** **Worried**
Concerned **Suspicious**

“It worries me considerably that you would change to a water source that will deplete... and represents the underinvestment strategy?”

Crewe control group

“All the unanswered questions make me worry.”

Penrith control group

“I got bored and I’m not sure what’s happening.”

Lightshaw hotspot group

Variable letter

Reassured **Concerned** Informed
 Unphased **Accepting**
 Reserved Resigned **Worried**
 Corporate A few questions Indifferent

“I wouldn’t get past the first paragraph, it’s just corporate speak.”

Penrith control group

“I don’t see anything wrong with that. So we’re giving you fair warning, and then it’s not permanent changes.”

Fylde hotspot group

“I think it ticks all the boxes, you know, it’s reassuring people that the water ain’t gonna be turned off. “

Fylde hotspot group

Initial reactions

The permanent letter sparks a more emotional response compared to the variable letter, due to the message it is conveying.

On reading the **permanent** letter, customers' immediate reactions are worry and concern about:

- the quality of their drinking water
- the impact on household appliances e.g. dishwashers, kettles
- the bathing experience
- health concerns – primarily the impact on the digestive system, skin
- the works leading to higher water bills
- the impact on fish and other pets .

Some believe that United Utilities are probably changing the source for economical reasons at the expense of the customers (some see groundwater as more economical, but also less finite, thus raising concerns about interruptions) and this angers them.

Ultimately customers feel that something valuable is being taken away from them.

Whilst those reading the **variable** letter have some of the same concerns, they are more accepting due to it not being permanent, although some ask 'how often' it would change. Three to six months is deemed to be the maximum timespan customers would put up with an alternative supply (unless the quality was significantly worse than expected). They can also see a possible long term benefit of a variable change which they can't see for a permanent one.

"I wonder whether there is a hidden agenda in this letter, which there probably is. They probably want to keep their profits high."

Penrith control group

"Be prepared to replace electric items. When you go to hard water you'll be replacing your washing machine, your iron, your kettle on an annual basis or we'll all be going out and buying a filters."

Crewe control group

"I think the biggest thing for me would be washing me clothes...I just think you'd notice your clothes feel harsher."

Crewe control group

"I think it contradicts so much and you have to pinpoint all these bits as you go along that it's not clear. It needs to be snap, snap snap, here are all the key bits – done."

Southport hotspot group

Expected action after receiving the letter

Customers are unlikely to contact United Utilities on receipt of the letter. Instead they will wait and see what happens.

If the water is worse than expected, they may make contact, but many don't feel they would because:

- It would take a long time to get through to someone
- Customer services will 'fob me off' or won't have any specific details/advice for this project
- There's nothing that United Utilities will do (they are a monopoly and will do as they like)

Instead, some said they would consult their MP or local councillor, some would go online and research filtering/purification products, and some may discuss its contents with friends, neighbours and family.

In fact, we have learnt during the complainant interviews that complaints/bad feeling tend not to be generated on receipt of the letter, but in the community discussions (in-person/social media) that may build on wider bad feeling to motivate complaints. Some referred to a strength in numbers approach to having a permanent change reversed.

On hearing about a variable change, customer sentiment is to wait and see. Even if they are unhappy they will typically wait it out for a few months.

The main thing the letter can do is prepare the reader, so that the reality is not too incongruous with expectation and provide alternative routes for information gathering (e.g. a project team rather than a customer service/complaints line).

"I'd prefer to put this in a drawer, and if there's any problems further down the line, I'd go on the website and have a look."

Lightshaw hotspot group

"If I had a vulnerable neighbour, I would make a point of going over to say have you seen your letter, is there anything you want me to check for you?"

Trafford control group

"I don't really have any alternatives, so there's not much point in contacting United Utilities."

Trafford control group

"If I felt really uncomfortable with it, I probably wouldn't approach United Utilities directly. I might approach my MP. . . because I think of the time getting bogged down with customer service and I might not get the answers."

Lancaster control group

Customer feedback: general

The general consensus is that the first draft letters are too long, with a preference for something more concise, clear and inclusive of all key information.

Overall, participants feel they need to be more to the point, particularly around:

- **Key dates**
- **The fact the permanent change is permanent**
- **That their water will be uninterrupted and safe to drink**
- **What the difference in water hardness means for them**

They query how they would be 'kept in the loop' by United Utilities, especially if they received the variable letter – they'd want to know whether they're on track, ahead of schedule? A progress report was suggested or an email opt in for updates.

In general, customers valued being informed of the change, even as bad news, with some feeling that the act of transparency helped build trust.

Participants feel the letters are too corporate in places and along with any hint of 'jargon' comes a mistrust of water companies in the current climate.

They'd prefer the communications to be more tailored to their area – this generates interest and trust.

United Utilities needs to make sure that the format is right for all customers and meeting their needs. E.g. colours, braille option.

"If this went through clear English it would fail!"

Southport hotspot group

"I think you've got to make sure as a provider you're meeting their needs at that very base level, especially when describing how it will affect you."

Lancaster control group

"Whether is it trustworthy? It depends whether you think it is a trustworthy brand!"

Southport hotspot group

"The current climate in terms of the publications around water treatment, water disposal, sewage disposal; people are kind of losing faith a little bit in water companies in terms of them valuing the environment, future generations, the rivers and lakes. And I think this communication with the customer is really important to kind of patch and rebuild that trust."

Trafford control group

Customer feedback: the letter introduction

The start of the letter is key, with some customers admitting they wouldn't get past the first paragraph or the call out box. From the outset customers need to know what is happening, when and why. They need reassurance their supply will not be interrupted and that their water will be safe to drink.

Informal intro

'Hello' feels too informal, a more respectful 'Dear customer' or 'Valued customer' is suggested



Leading with 'sales' language

A core criticism of the draft letter is that priority was given to jargon or "waffle".



Too vague

Customers get lost in the first paragraph. It is not clear that the change is permanent (in the permanent letter) or why it is happening. **This leads to uncertainty and UU doesn't come across as being transparent.**



Also, some of the language is felt to be scaremongering



United Utilities Water Limited
PO Box 453
Warrington
WA55 1SE
Telephone: 0345 672 3723
unitedutilities.com

Hello

We're having to make some changes to your water to help safeguard it for the future

As part of our long-term plans, our teams regularly carry out a range of maintenance and improvement projects on the pipes and infrastructure that makes up the water network across the North West. This helps safeguard and support homes, businesses and new development in areas of [insert location] a way that also balances the needs of the environment. We do this so we can protect the supply of quality water, for now and future generations, in the face of demands such as climate change and population growth.

[call out box]
Your water source will change from [insert date]. You do not need to do anything and there will be no interruption to your supply.

Commentary on the letter introduction reflects the views of customers across the hotspot and control areas and about the permanent and variable letters as the only difference is the text in the call out box. Customers in Fylde and Southport who critiqued the variable change letter, especially stressed the importance of clearly communicating key dates upfront, with a desire for both start and end dates.

"The word 'safeguard' implies we're not going to have any water"

Southport hotspot group (variable)

"I don't feel like this is someone I really trust because it is smothered in all this woolly stuff"

Penrith control group (permanent)

"How it would impact you should go to the beginning!"

Southport hotspot group (variable)



"I would put in big letters at the top, We are changing your water. Why? Because x,y,z. This will be done dates, time."

Southport hotspot group (variable)

Long term plan

This is seen as a positive and some customers would want to know more about the wider plans via a link to UU's website. **Essentially, even a permanent change CAN be viewed as a gain.**



Call out box

Whilst well received, it is felt that this needs to be above the first paragraph. For those not into the detail, this needs to communicate the key information.



"I wouldn't be able to get past the first paragraph because it is just corporate speak... the meat of the letter is later on so why don't you start with the meat?"

Penrith control group (permanent)

Customer feedback: description of the work

It is felt that this section of the permanent letter doesn't get to the crux of why their water is changing and what it means for customers. Customers get lost in the detail and the lack of direction leads them to draw their own conclusions which heightens anxiety and sometimes anger.

Lack of clarity over timings (variable)

Of particular interest to the recipients of the variable change notification is the lack of definite timings

Lack of clarity over why their water source is changing (permanent)

Customers get lost in the extensive content in the first couple of paragraphs leading to them not being sure why United Utilities is changing their water source or specifically where is affected. However, the case put forward in the variable letter is deemed to be good.

"We all felt it did make a good case."

Lancaster control group (variable)

"There isn't much that pins it down geographically to what the effects are going to be to the customers within a specific geographic area... "

Penrith control group (both)

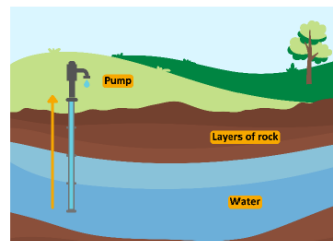
Our next stage of work

From [insert date], and continuing through to [insert date] we'll begin the next phase of our work which will help to ensure you have quality drinking water now and in the future. This will involve making some changes to the source of water we supply to you.

We'll be using one of our other drinking water sources/treatment sites and re-routing your water from different treatment works and along different pipes. This will make the network more efficient and the right size to meet demand in the area.

What will the changes mean for you?

Once the work is completed, your water will be supplied from a different drinking water source (called an aquifer). A lot of mineral bottled water is sourced from aquifers. Water from underground aquifers tends to have a higher mineral content as it has passed through layers of rock, before being pumped to the surface, treated and then distributed into the pipe network. Check out the diagram below to see how an aquifer works.



Feedback on the aquifer image and associated text is unanimous across all audiences.

The lack of clear messaging in this section raises anxiety. In addition, a minority believe that this is a money saving move by UU, switching to a lower quality source which leaves them feeling shafted (especially with the backdrop of increasing bills).

Aquifer image

Poor, cartoonish, and unnecessary. It isn't very clear what it is – several thought it was a golf course! Doesn't add more to understanding.

Copy oversells the benefits of the change

Comparisons to bottled mineral water were sometimes felt to be a transparent attempt to mislead and 'sell' what is likely to be an inferior product for the customer. This in turn affected trustworthiness of the letter.

Customers are expecting more on what a change to hard water means in their homes

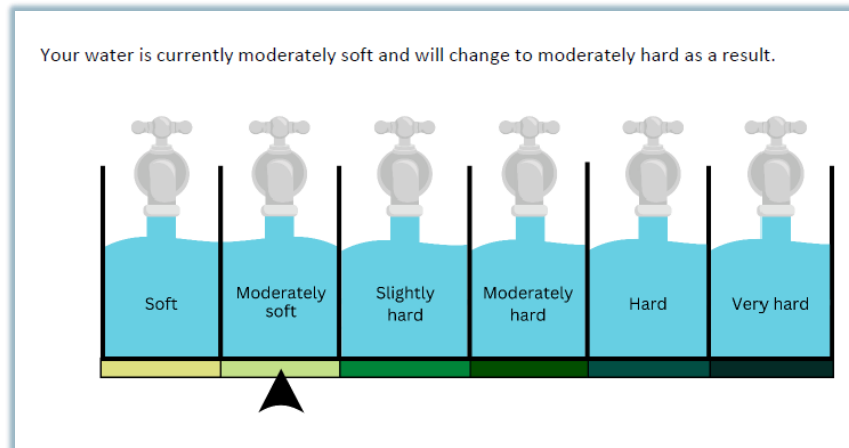
Instead there is information on how aquifers work and this is felt to be unnecessary and for some a cheaper option which threatens the continuity of their supply.

Customer feedback: water hardness scale

Whilst the water hardness scale comes under a lot of scrutiny, it is deemed important by the majority, especially for those with short attention spans or who would struggle to read the letter.

In its current format the scale feels misleading

- No indicator for movement 'to' the new water hardness
- Unbalanced scale / Implication that hard water is normal – can feel like they're being manipulated.
- Water looks the same in each section – confusing
- The use of black beneath the hard water scale symbolises something bad



Feedback on whether the water hardness scale is needed is very individual with a mixed response to this within both the control and hotspot audiences.

All customers regardless of area or which letter they viewed, feel that the image needs some improvement.

The image takes up a lot of space

The taps take up space and some question whether they are necessary. What customers really want is more on what 'moderately hard means'



"That's expensive to send on paper... In my mind, I'm thinking my bill is £440 and they're spending all this money on a kiddie image – all they need is two paragraphs."

Southport hotspot group

Water hardness scale is important

For many, the inclusion a water hardness scale is important for a number of reasons:

- It helps break up the text and makes the whole letter more easily digested
- It draws the eye to the most crucial piece of information
- It is more accessible for those with dyslexia or who do not speak English well



"I'm not sure whether the water scale diagram tells you much because colour isn't really an indicator for water. Not everyone can see colour and the last 3 colours look very similar to one another."

Lancaster control group

"The diagram is very misleading, especially to a skim reader. Looks like not a big change but read on and it is."

Lancaster control group

"I'd rather have, currently your water is moderately soft. During the work it will go to moderately hard. This is only going to be a variable change during the work"

Southport hotspot group

Customer feedback: potential impact on customer

Customers want more content on how it will impact them. The final two paragraphs raise more questions than answers and customers suggest that a link to FAQs on the website would reassure.

The first paragraph is too vague which raises concerns



Some customers suggest a postcode finder so they can see how they are affected. They also want more of an indication of when these changes are going to happen

“The text that “timescales can change” isn’t very trustworthy and can be quite concerning.”

Lancaster control group

Lack of practical information



Customers want more content on what impact the change will have on households and many suggested FAQs on the website (or in leaflet format for the elderly).

Those who had been in contact with United Utilities were particularly keen to see guidance for acquiring filters or water softeners.

How quickly you may start to receive a change in your water through to your tap is dependent on usage and where you live. Due to a variety of factors we cannot give you a precise timeframe of when your water will be impacted, however you will see the changes in the next coming months.

Whatever the source or treatment works, the drinking water we supply is treated and constantly monitored throughout its journey, from its source right through to taps to ensure it’s clean and safe—meeting strict standards set by the Drinking Water Inspectorate.

While many customers may not notice a difference in their drinking water, those that do sometimes notice:

- A change in taste and appearance of hot and cold drinks
- Soap lathering differently

If you have any devices such as dishwashers, medical devices which use water or keep reptile, fish or aquatic species, please visit unitedutilities.com/your-water-supply for more information on how this may affect you.

Concerns that this may impact them financially

Those who have experienced hard water have in some cases paid out for filter jugs, limescale removal tablets and new electrical items. These financial concerns are a reality for some reading this letter. Along with worries about whether it will lead to bill increases.

Feedback is consistent across hotspot and control areas, with those in hotspot areas more aware of the financial impacts a change can have.

Final paragraph unnerves rather than reassures



The final paragraph, which invites the reader to review the United Utilities website if they have devices or pets that may be affected by the change, causes alarm for many. In particular, the sentence hints at issues that could affect their finances, health, and pets, without providing any necessary context, severity, or reassurance.

“Some of the wording is quite scary to me... the way you make tea and your dishwasher worries me a little bit.”

Trafford control group

“It’s the last bit about the dishwasher and fish. That raised concerns a bit.”

Lightshaw hotspot group

Customer feedback: contact and sign off

Whilst most claim not to be too bothered about who signs off the letter, getting it wrong can be detrimental to the credibility and trustworthiness of the letter



Letter signatory

A common desire among customers is that they be given the contact details of a manager or team directly involved in their own water source change project. This would reassure them that, if concerned, they would have access to someone who is knowledgeable about both the process of the supply change (to reassure them about safety, timescales, etc) and the specific local context (to avoid generic or unhelpful advice). Similarly, customers are keen that the website provides specific and detailed information, rather than simply giving generic information.

Accessing online information

A QR code for making online information easier to access is a popular suggestion.

We're here to help

If you have any queries about the changes you can find further information at unitedutilities.com/yourwater or give our customer services team a call on 0345 6723 723 quoting project number 80060750.

Thank you

Louise Beardmore

Chief Executive Officer

There is no consensus about who should sign off the letter. For example, Southport preferred a customer service advisor for the variable change letter, Crewe wanted the head of engineering for the variable one. There are mixed views on the CEO. Most think this couldn't be credible but a few think it adds credibility.

"You need to make sure that the number on the letter has somebody on the other end of the phone who knows what they're talking about."

Fylde hotspot group



Who should sign the letter?

Initial reactions to the letter signatory are typically a feeling of low importance, especially if the individual is thought to be too senior to actually have played a part in drafting the letter. Some feel the more senior the signatory, the more it's costing them

"I'd say how much of my money is going towards that person?"

Southport hotspot group

"You know it isn't actually that person."

Liverpool control group

However, further discussions indicated that:

- An engineering or science title offered more credibility and trustworthiness than a chief executive, business, or customer services role
- A local/regional role implied a closer connection to the work in their area than a central role



FAQs

Whilst customers don't want more detail in the letters, some want the choice of finding out more and a FAQs section was suggested by many.

This was seen as preferable to calling United Utilities, which was deemed unnecessary and too time consuming for most.

The most common question which came up was **'what does moderately hard mean for me?'**

Some people want to understand more about the chemical composition of the water, some want reassurance it's safe and most just want more details on how different levels of water hardness will affect their day to day lives, be it, their washing machine, their drinking water or their hair and skin.

The second most common area is more detail on **'why is United Utilities changing my water?'** Whilst most feel there is enough in the letters, some want more information around this.

"What kind of medical devices? Because it's a bit of a broad term...The same for the dishwasher, how would it affect it?"

Lightshaw hotspot group

"What do you mean by soft, moderately soft? Slightly hard, moderately hard, hard, and very hard?"

Fylde hotspot group

"I haven't got time to sit on hold. No. But if you can send a link to the frequently asked questions..."

Lightshaw hotspot group

"What type of chemicals are gonna go into it to make it from soft to hard?"

Trafford control group

I'd rather know what exactly is changing about the water, whether it's a chemical change that's affecting these things. And just even though I'm a complete lay person when it comes to science and stuff, it's just I'd rather be informed and sort of feel that United Utilities are being very open and if you want information, here it is."

Lightshaw hotspot group



Additional information tested in Phase 1

Following the pilot focus group, a series of show cards were produced by United Utilities to test whether customers felt any additional content was needed in the letters.

1. Chemical makeup

The drinking water supplied to you meets the standards required by European Union legislation, for example the levels of sodium in your water is 7.32 mg Na/l (compared to UK/EA limit of 200).

The drinking water supplied to you meets the standards required by the Drinking Water Inspectorate, who are the governing body to ensure drinking water is safe and acceptable to consumers.

Blending water from different sources is absolutely safe and undergoes the same rigorous treatment process, so you can continue to use water as you normally would.

2. Level of testing

United Utilities monitor the quality of water as it leaves the treatment works and service reservoirs to make sure that standards are being met, by taking over 40,000 water samples across the pipe network and at customers taps.

The consensus is that as it is written, this will confuse people, but a simplified version would be useful online.

“I think at the end of the day if you want to put more technical stuff in, put it online.”

Southport hotspot group

“So if someone wants to know then they can go to that link and then have an explanation of this.”

Fylde hotspot group

This is felt to be clear and informative, but customers trust that United Utilities is complying with regulatory requirements and so it's felt this wouldn't add anything to the letter and in a way it may over-reassure.

“One wonders why they feel it necessary to say that the water is safe.”

Penrith control group

“It's just I think there's an assumption that they comply with regulatory requirements.”

Lancaster control group

Additional information tested in Phase 1

3. Fluoride

The current and future drinking water supplied to you is low in naturally occurring fluoride and is not artificially fluoridated.

4. How many people it serves

The drinking water blend your supply is changing to, already serves over 30,000 people in the North West.

It's assumed that fluoride levels are not relevant to what is happening, but if they are going to change they need to know. Otherwise it is useful to read this online.

"I think that can be important because the fluoride levels are low. So that could be valuable somewhere, but would I add it to this this letter? No. Not unless it was changing the levels of fluoride."

Lancaster control group

"If it's changed yeah, if it's not no."

Lightshaw hotspot group

There are mixed feelings on this one. For some it provides some reassurance, and some feel it could be added into the letter.

"This is reassuring. It could be at the end. I could be reassured that other people are drinking that. A keeper."

Southport hotspot group

"I don't think it's necessary, but it could be added to the first paragraph."

Fylde hotspot group

Additional information tested in Phase 1

5. Wider plan

The decision to change your drinking water blend is part of the United Utilities Water Resources Management Plan, which ensures we have enough supply to meet demand over plans for the next 25 years, taking into account climate change, weather predictions and population growth.

This is of interest to many and provides reassurance, however, it is too much text for the letter and a link would need to be provided to the website. Those in Fylde (who only saw the variable change letter), feel that it implies a permanent change, so United Utilities need to be careful when wording this.

“That’s reassuring to know.”

Lightshaw hotspot group

“Well, that that sounds like it's gonna be changing permanently.”

Fylde hotspot group

6. Interruption

The changes to your drinking water will not affect the supply or pressure of your water.

Mixed views on whether this should be included. Some feel that it is already included and most agree it should, but a significant minority feel that by including this United Utilities could be overpromising.

“That's a big claim, actually. I don't think they can promise that. It sounds sort of a bit of a tall order.”

Penrith control group

Additional information tested in Phase 1

7. Limestone

The softness and hardness of your drinking water supply is caused by how the water is collected (eg reservoir or aquifer) and the levels of naturally occurring limestone in the source. It is not caused by adding or taking away new chemicals.

This is of interest to many, and a handful feel it could go in the letter, but most feel it's too much and should be online.

"I'd find that's interesting."

Lightshaw hotspot group

"I think that the more you add, lots of people end up just putting it in the recycling."

Fylde hotspot group

8. Chlorine

All public water supplies must be disinfected by law to destroy any bacteria which may be harmful to your health. Chlorine is used to treat drinking water and to keep it safe to drink, it isn't harmful but some people are more sensitive to the taste and smell than others.

Many find this interesting, however, the consensus is that it should be on the website.

"I'd find that's interesting."

Lightshaw hotspot group

"It depends how much poo they put in the river!"

Southport hotspot group

Mode of Communication

The majority feel that a letter is the most appropriate channel for initial contact, although for many email is a more versatile support channel with a number of benefits.

A letter sent through the post is a core expectation from customers. It allows United Utilities to send the notification in a visible and accurately targeted way to the households affected.

Letters are also valued for providing accessibility for the digitally excluded and those cautious of online scams.

However, for many there are additional benefits to receiving notification by email:

- Many don't like the clutter of a letter
- It allows them to store/refer back to the letter without taking up space in the home
- It's easier to access hyperlinks

Despite these benefits, few would want to see letters replaced and would prefer, instead, for email to act as a flexible and complementary communication.

The idea of receiving regular updates throughout the water source change process was popular but not universally wanted. A preferable situation would be the option to opt-in to email or SMS updates.

"I get my bill by email. I never get anything in the post from [United Utilities] but there would be people who don't have email so they must be able to [receive it]. You know, why not for this as well? We were trying to reduce paper. I quite like email in some ways in that if I'm trying to find that letter, it's much easier to do a search on email than it is to go through all the stacks of paper I've got right now."

Penrith control group

"You'd assume that you would have to contact them to stay in the loop but I would prefer a text or email."

Lancaster control group

Considerations for the health vulnerable

Experiences (I)

Across the conversations we undertook, we spoke to a number of customers with differing health vulnerabilities. These conversations revealed varied needs relating to their water supply and communications related to it.

Conditions most commonly raised by customers as being directly affected by changes in water characteristic include autism, skin conditions, and mobility issues, with conditions such as OCD also noted. Their experiences and concerns are noted across the next two slides.

In order to maximise the support the water change notifications provide to this audience, they need to:

- provide clear, accessible, and straightforward information about the process and implications of the change.
- adequately signpost customers to appropriate support and advice about their condition/equipment.
- operate on a flexible channel to suit the needs of the audience (e.g., online, letter, telephone contact, large print).
- support and enable people who act as carers to discuss the topic with and reassure both themselves.

In the Crewe control group, we benefitted from conversations with two healthcare professionals, who, in line with United Utilities' current policy, suggested that United Utilities' role should simply be to refer those with a health vulnerability on to appropriate support (e.g., GP, PSR) rather than try to dispense direct advice.

Case study: autism

- Independently across the groups, three parents noted how a change in water supply would likely impact their autistic child.
- For one, their child would only reliably drink tap water, struggling with bottled water (see below). Furthermore, their tolerance for hard water is very low, meaning that a sudden change in water source could cause extreme anxiety.
- Others echoed this sentiment, stating that changes in the sensory experience or palatability of their water at home would cause real issues for them.

“My son loves tap water when it comes out really, really cold from the tap. It's a small thing but for him because he's got additional needs... for him it regulates his body. So, the cold temperature changes something in his neurosystem... he just says it tastes good and it's cold and makes him happy.

[If he's away from the house] I put it in a bottle [but] he doesn't like the taste... he said the plastic makes the water change the taste.

When we go to my sister-in-law's in Oswestry, he doesn't drink tap water because it's disgusting. But, yeah, he likes our home water.”

Trafford control group

Experiences (II)

Case study: skin conditions

- A small number of participants noted that they or someone they care for has a skin condition, such as eczema, and were concerned about how a water source change may affect this.
- They were keen to seek reassurance that either the change would not interact with their condition or that advice was available for managing it.

“I would like to contact someone about skin. Children have eczema so I would want to know how it would affect you.

It says why it's changing but it doesn't make a case for the medical issues within the house and how that will be affected.”

Crewe control group

- It was suggested that United Utilities needed to ensure that enough advanced notice was given for those with medical conditions and/or devices in order to get in touch with a medical professional (something that can take a long time).

Case study: mobility

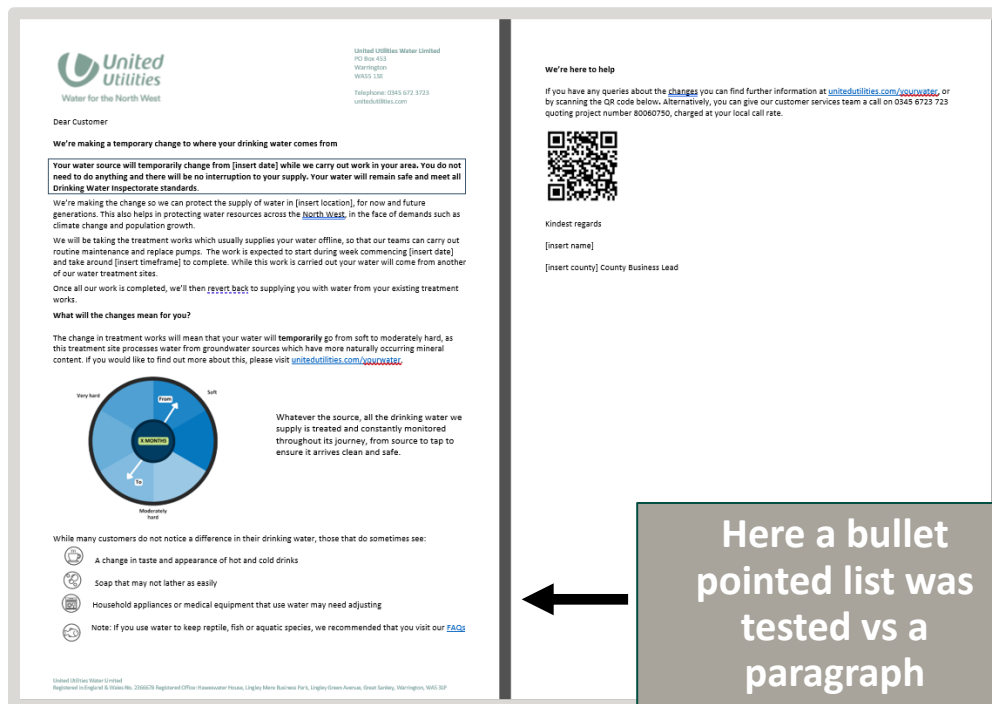
- While not a condition that directly interacts with water characteristics, there are concerns amongst some of those with reduced mobility.
- Fears stem from the fact that, where water was felt to be unpalatable, unusable for bathing, and/or unsafe, severe mobility issues would leave them either having to arrange the logistics of water being brought to them or simply having to tolerate the new water.
- Neither of these options presented as acceptable to those in this situation, who felt trapped.

Revised materials

Revised communications tested in reconvened groups and depths

United Utilities used the feedback on the initial drafts and the behavioural science levers and created revised drafts. Those recruited had been asked if they were happy to take part in further online sessions to review these drafts. A selection of participants from the different control groups took part in 2 online groups, while one online group was conducted with participants from the 3 hotspot area groups. In addition, 5 complainants were recontacted. Two iterations of the permanent letter were tested across a control group, the hotspot group and the depths and two new versions of the variable change letter were tested in the other control group. **As before, the scenarios presented in the letters are mocked up for the purposes of the research and do not describe real water blend change plans.**

Permanent letter A



The mockup for 'Permanent letter A' features the United Utilities logo and contact information at the top. The main heading is 'Dear Customer' followed by 'We're making a temporary change to where your drinking water comes from'. A highlighted box contains the text: 'Your water source will temporarily change from [insert date] while we carry out work in your area. You do not need to do anything and there will be no interruption to your supply. Your water will remain safe and meet all Drinking Water Inspectorate standards.' Below this, a paragraph explains the change: 'We're making the change so we can protect the supply of water in [insert location], for now and future generations. This also helps in protecting water resources across the North West, in the face of demands such as climate change and population growth. We will be taking the treatment works which usually supplies your water offline, so that our teams can carry out routine maintenance and replace pumps. The work is expected to start during week commencing [insert date] and take around [insert timeframe] to complete. While this work is carried out your water will come from another of our water treatment sites. Once all our work is completed, we'll then revert back to supplying you with water from your existing treatment works. What will the changes mean for you? The change in treatment works will mean that your water will temporarily go from soft to moderately hard, as this treatment site processes water from groundwater sources which have more naturally occurring mineral content. If you would like to find out more about this, please visit unitedutilities.com/yourwater'.

A circular diagram shows water sources: 'Very hard' (top), 'Soft' (right), and 'Moderately hard' (bottom). A central box labeled 'Whichever' is connected to all three. Text next to it says: 'Whatever the source, all the drinking water we supply is treated and constantly monitored throughout its journey, from source to tap ensuring it arrives clean and safe.'

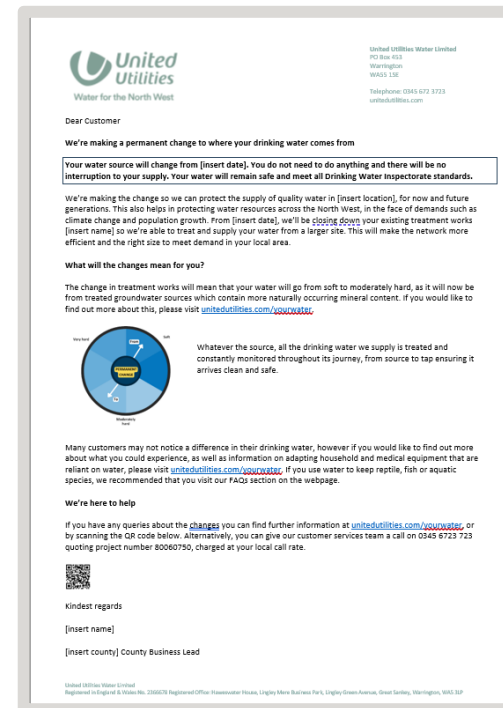
Below the diagram, it states: 'While many customers do not notice a difference in their drinking water, those that do sometimes see:' followed by a bulleted list:

- ☹️ A change in taste and appearance of hot and cold drinks
- 🧼 Soap that may not lather as easily
- 🔧 Household appliances or medical equipment that use water may need adjusting

Note: If you use water to keep reptile, fish or aquatic species, we recommended that you visit our [FAQs](#)

At the bottom, it says 'United Utilities Water Limited' and 'Registered in England & Wales No. 2306278 Registered Office: Haemaster House, Lingley Grove Avenue, Great Sankey, Warrington, Wals 3P'.

Variable letter B



The mockup for 'Variable letter B' features the United Utilities logo and contact information at the top. The main heading is 'Dear Customer' followed by 'We're making a permanent change to where your drinking water comes from'. A highlighted box contains the text: 'Your water source will change from [insert date]. You do not need to do anything and there will be no interruption to your supply. Your water will remain safe and meet all Drinking Water Inspectorate standards.' Below this, a paragraph explains the change: 'We're making the change so we can protect the supply of quality water in [insert location], for now and future generations. This also helps in protecting water resources across the North West, in the face of demands such as climate change and population growth. From [insert date], we'll be **opping down** your existing treatment works [insert name] so we're able to treat and supply your water from a larger site. This will make the network more efficient and the right size to meet demand in your local area. What will the changes mean for you? The change in treatment works will mean that your water will go from soft to moderately hard, as it will now be from treated groundwater sources which contain more naturally occurring mineral content. If you would like to find out more about this, please visit unitedutilities.com/yourwater'.

A circular diagram shows water sources: 'Very hard' (top), 'Soft' (right), and 'Moderately hard' (bottom). A central box labeled 'Whichever' is connected to all three. Text next to it says: 'Whatever the source, all the drinking water we supply is treated and constantly monitored throughout its journey, from source to tap ensuring it arrives clean and safe.'

Below the diagram, it states: 'Many customers may not notice a difference in their drinking water, however if you would like to find out more about what you could experience, as well as information on adapting household and medical equipment that are reliant on water, please visit unitedutilities.com/yourwater, if you use water to keep reptile, fish or aquatic species, we recommended that you visit our [FAQs](#) section on the webpage. We're here to help If you have any queries about the changes you can find further information at unitedutilities.com/yourwater, or by scanning the QR code below. Alternatively, you can give our customer services team a call on 0345 6723 723 quoting project number 80060750, charged at your local call rate.'

At the bottom, it says 'United Utilities Water Limited' and 'Registered in England & Wales No. 2306278 Registered Office: Haemaster House, Lingley Grove Avenue, Great Sankey, Warrington, Wals 3P'.

Here a bullet pointed list was tested vs a paragraph

Initial reactions

The consensus is that both revised versions of the letter (permanent and variable) are improvements on the drafts tested in the first stage of the research.

Positives

- ✓ More concise and to the point (one page a plus)
- ✓ Easier to read and well laid out – call out box catches attention
- ✓ Less confusing – they like the fact that it states it's a 'permanent change' up front
- ✓ Less patronising – the original was oversimplified with childlike images
- ✓ Diagram is much better (but still room for improvement)
- ✓ Bulleted icon list is liked by the majority (however, some find it confusing)
- ✓ QR code a good addition
- ✓ 'Dear customer' – an improvement
- ✓ Like the local angle
- ✓ FAQs – comprehensive and a good addition

"One of the first words I put down when I read the letter was 'concise' and I was reassured to know exactly what was happening."

Reconvened control group

"I think it's miles better for a start than the last letter."

Reconvened hotspot group

Negatives

- × The diagram divides opinion – all are agreed it's an improvement on the last one, but it still requires improvement and a minority feel it's not necessary
- × The bullets (icons) are liked by the majority but for some they take up too much space and the use of the word 'may' heightens anxiety and may initiate contact
- × Not sure about the signatory – like the localness, but a 'business lead'? Doesn't sound very relevant
- × Some anxiety around the example scenario of closure of local treatment works

"The first one did it and this one does a bit, comes across as a bit of a negative message and actually what United Utilities is doing is a big investment."

Reconvened hotspot group

Customer feedback: the letter introduction

The updated introduction is seen as strong, concise and to the point. The tone is more informative and more planned, thus reassuring customers and increasing trustworthiness.



Strong factual opening sentence

Improves clarity, customers know exactly what the letter is about.

“I think that that initial box at the top is what's reassuring for me, it is that my supply is gonna sort of change, but I don't need to do anything so I'm not gonna have any interruption. That that's the reassuring bit for me.”

Reconvened hotspot group



Call out box

Well received. It contains all the key points – dates, no action needed, no interruptions and no safety concerns.

United Utilities Water Limited
PO Box 453
Warrington
WA55 1SE
Telephone: 0345 672 3723
unitedutilities.com

Dear Customer

We're making a permanent change to where your drinking water comes from

Your water source will change from [insert date]. You do not need to do anything and there will be no interruption to your supply. Your water will remain safe and meet all Drinking Water Inspectorate standards.

We're making the change so we can protect the supply of quality water in [insert location], for now and future generations. This also helps in protecting water resources across the North West, in the face of demands such as climate change and population growth. From [insert date], we'll be closing down your existing treatment works [insert name] so we're able to treat and supply your water from a larger site. This will make the network more efficient and the right size to meet demand in your local area.

Consider a heading below the call out box

The paragraph below the box was described as 'floating' – a heading e.g. Why we are making changes in your area – would alleviate this and pull in the reader.



“I feel like it's missing a heading above the first paragraph something along the lines of 'Why are we making these changes?'”

Reconvened hotspot group

First paragraph

An improvement on the first letter which was too 'jargony' and 'wishy-washy'. Customers like references to:

- Their locality
- Preserving water for current and future generations
- Dates

In fact some feel more could be made of the fact that United Utilities is making this investment.



“I think you could be a bit more positive about some of the wording in there about investing in the future.”

Reconvened hotspot group

Closing down your existing treatment works

This example phrase does alarm some readers



Customer feedback: description of the works & image

Participants prefer the scaled down explanation of why their water will change from soft to moderately hard. The new diagram is preferred to the one in the first draft, however, further improvements are recommended.

Content

Concise and to the point. Doesn't ring alarm bells like the paragraph and associated image of an aquifer did in the first draft.



While some are keen to lose the **image** 'because it doesn't add anything', the majority deem it to be important because:

- It helps break up the text and makes the whole letter more easily digested
- It draws the eye to the most crucial piece of information
- It is more accessible for those with dyslexia or do not speak English well

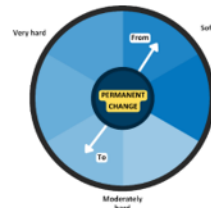


"In my view it doesn't need it because you're already telling me it's going from soft to moderately hard."

Reconvened hotspot group

What will the changes mean for you?

The change in treatment works will mean that your water will go from soft to moderately hard, as it will now be from treated groundwater sources which contain more naturally occurring mineral content. If you would like to find out more about this, please visit unitedutilities.com/yourwater.



Whatever the source, all the drinking water we supply is treated and constantly monitored throughout its journey, from source to tap ensuring it arrives clean and safe.

"To my mind the diagram, again, is unnecessary, but I'm aware that some people kind of work in pictures and other people work in words."

Reconvened control group

"I'm not colourblind, but I imagine for someone with any sort of colourblind issues just because it's such a small difference between them. Whereas to go from very different colours might be easier."

Reconvened control group

New image preferred but not perfect

- Customers prefer the dial shape
- The indicator is going from soft to moderately hard (something which was lacking in the first image).



Recommendations

Change the colours – clearer to have different colours for each segment or to graduate the colours from light (soft) to dark (hard).
Some opposed to it being circular – it's a linear scale, also, a minority read it as a 50% increase in hardness (a pie chart implies proportions).

"It shouldn't be in a circle – the harder you make it, then it's soft again. It should be linear."

Reconvened control group

Customer feedback: potential impact on customer

Participants were shown two iterations describing the potential impact on customers. Preference is for the bulleted version, although a significant minority preferred Version B, mainly because it keeps the letter to one page

Version A - Likes



Visually this works for more customers. It breaks up the letter, draws the readers eye to this section and is good for those with dyslexia, ADHD, English as a Second Language.

Version A - Dislikes



There are concerns that this results in the letter going over two pages. It raises more questions than it answers and the word 'may' promotes uncertainty. One participant is worried it would cost more to print.

Version A

While many customers do not notice a difference in their drinking water, those that do sometimes see:



A change in taste and appearance of hot and cold drinks



Soap that may not lather as easily



Household appliances or medical equipment that use water may need adjusting



Note: If you use water to keep reptile, fish or aquatic species, we recommended that you visit our [FAQs](#)

Version B

Many customers may not notice a difference in their drinking water, however if you would like to find out more about what you could experience, as well as information on adapting household and medical equipment that are reliant on water, please visit [unitedutilities.com/yourwater](#). If you use water to keep reptile, fish or aquatic species, we recommended that you visit our FAQs section on the webpage.

Version B



A mixed response to this paragraph. Prior to seeing Version A, many are accepting of Version B and happy to visit the website for more information. Some, however, feel that this version of the letter does lack any detail on what changing to hard water means, something which Version A addresses.

“From my perspective it just lengthens the correspondence and gives me even more stuff I won't read.”

Reconvened hotspot group (A)

“I think the having the word 'may' in a couple of those statements is 'well, is it or isn't it?' You need a bit of certainty when you're having things explained to you, so I don't like that addition at all...that would just make me question it probably more than I need to.”

Reconvened hotspot group (Version A)

“That statement about 'household appliances or medical equipment...', I just find that a little bit vague; that'll panic me because what did it mean by may need adjusting and how so? And then there's no link off anywhere for that one.”

Reconvened hotspot group (Version A)

“So if you print that infographic, which I don't like anyway, that that's probably doubling the cost of that letter.”

Reconvened hotspot group (A)

Customer feedback: contact and sign off

The QR code is a welcome addition, however, the introduction of a regional business lead as the letter signatory is not well received. Typically, most would not choose to make contact after receiving the letter.

Contact details



Whilst customers like the idea of a more regional contact with a closer connection to the work, they question the relevance of a 'business lead'.

They are not sure what a business lead does and many don't see a connection between this role and the project described in the letter – for some it suggests a business/finance role, with some linking it to their perception that the decision to change their water is to save money.

"I don't know whether it's best having it from the business lead. It makes me feel like it's a financial decision to do what they're doing as opposed to providing a better service or a health benefit or whatever it might be."

Reconvened hotspot group

We're here to help

If you have any queries about the changes you can find further information at unitedutilities.com/yourwater, or by scanning the QR code below. Alternatively, you can give our customer services team a call on 0345 6723 723 quoting project number 80060750, charged at your local call rate.



Kindest regards

[insert name]

[insert county] County Business Lead

"The only thing I'd say though is it coming from someone local on the bottom of this letter seems more genuine than some science officer, cause that just comes off as a little bit gimmicky, especially given how overly simplified the language in the last letter was and how childlike the diagrams were."

Reconvened hotspot group

Who should sign the letter?



Who signs the letter is of relatively low importance, however, if United Utilities gets it wrong, it could impact on the trustworthiness of the message.

- The letter signatory should be **relevant** – 'business lead' is not viewed this way.
- They should be **local** or at least regional which depicts a closer connection to the work
- They need to be **tangible** and leave customers feeling that they actually input into the letter.

A few participants suggest someone in a community based or customer relations role.

Accessing online information

All welcome the addition of a QR code.

FAQs

The FAQs is another welcome addition.

Following the first groups, United Utilities compiled a list of FAQs which was shown to participants and it was warmly received.

Customers feel the list of FAQs should start with their 'most important' i.e. 'how the water is going to be different' but they assume they will be presented as a list on the website with a hyperlink to the detail.

Whilst it is felt that the FAQs listed are all relevant, a few more suggestions have been made:

- one for pet owners (outside of those with fish/aquariums), even if it is just to say there is nothing to worry about
- given the increasing trend for hot tub ownership, a FAQ for hot tub owners
- any other appliances which may be affected.
- advice on filtering/combating the affects of hard water

"They're covering every eventuality for you to get in touch, which in itself is more reassuring than you thinking that you're gonna be on the phone for half an hour."

Reconvened control group

"I don't know if it would it affect washing machines or people who have water that comes out of their fridge doors. I don't know if there's like other machines that need to be considered there as well."

Reconvened control group

"Different people have different priorities and I think what would probably make this a little bit nicer is if all the headings at the top with hyperlinks, so you could go to the one that was more important for you first cause personally that's what I tend to do with FAQ, you know."

Reconvened hotspot group

"It's a bit of a first world problem this but it seems to be some somewhat of a boom industry - we've got a hot tub...and loads of people have them now..., so is the hardness of water is gonna affect those? I know some people who live in quite hard water areas where their hot tubs have to be serviced more regularly."

Reconvened hotspot group

"I've got dogs and one of my cats has got a condition whereby he's got to be given certain medication, otherwise he gets the calcium build up in his bladder and it blocks his urinary tract. It might be nice that if other, more common pets were mentioned, even if there's no concern to be had ... you know, you don't need to worry or cats and dogs if they've got these conditions."

Reconvened hotspot group

Recommendations

Recommended changes to the letter

The revised letter works well. It is clear and to the point. The right bits stand out (salience) and it manages expectations. However, further improvements are required to optimise effectiveness.

For the example scenario, the notion that their treatment works will be closing down will alarm some customers (loss) so justifications around why this is happening alongside the 'gains' that will occur once customers are being supplied by the larger site will quell any sense of unease for the majority. **For this to happen, more should be made of the fact that United Utilities is making an investment to secure and improve future supplies.**

The **water hardness image should be kept** as it is potentially the only bit that those who struggle to read/have English as a Second Language will look at (salience) . However, it requires improvement:

- **Change the colours:** use different colours for each segment or graduate the colours from light (soft) to dark (hard).
- **Some are opposed to it being circular** – it's a linear scale, also, a minority read it as a 50% increase in hardness (a pie chart implies proportions).

Customers welcome information on what it means to have hard water (expectation) and **most like the bulleted icons** (though for some it's a problem that it goes over a page).

They welcome the QR code and the FAQs (expectation), but further additions need making i.e. how to combat the effects of hard water, advice on other appliances and to allay the fears of general pet owners.

It's important to get the messenger right. 'Business Lead' isn't the right signatory. They like the fact they're local but don't see the relevance of the 'business' role to the changes, which can reinforce a suspicion that changes are being made for commercial reasons. There will never be universal approval of one messenger, but our recommendation is for a local role to be used which customers feel a connection with, maybe a community relations manager.

Other recommendations

If United Utilities doesn't fill the gaps, people will reach for the information around them, which is almost universally drawn from negative press coverage (safety, sewage, profiteering).

Justify locally not generically. Broadly the takeouts have been consistent across the regions. However, customers often would like to see the detail and, especially, justification for the change made on a much more local level e.g. naming treatment works, maps of the area affected. This does not need to be included in the initial letter, but should be available by request and online.

It's likely that most complainants simply want reassurance and to have their voice heard. **Consistent communication and meaningful, localised detail** will help these customers who more than often, don't hold aspirations to change the supply back as they suspect it's a lost cause. **Local community engagement** or contact with a **local community relations representative** may well provide them with a source of this information/reassurance without the need for raising a contact/complaint.

A minority still hold the view that via group action (mass complaints) may prevent/reverse the water blend change, often organised on social media. **Local community engagement** could help here too.

Advise on what hard water mitigation products (filters, etc) are available. Could subsidised access to these products be arranged?

Mention of the PSR and a link to registration in the health-related FAQs show customers United Utilities cares.

Retain the letter as the primary mode, but consider a supporting email/SMS campaign for updates on progress and wider information and more flexible/proactive options for those who are vulnerable.

Appendix 1

Stimulus shown

Versions of letters shown in focus groups

Letter versions were rotated across the groups and within the control groups as follows:

Group	Audience	Location	Ordering in groups	Letter version
1	Control	Trafford	1 st – Variable 2 nd – Permanent	A
2	Control	Crewe	1 st – Permanent 2 nd – Variable	B
3	Hotspot	Southport	Variable only	C
4	Control	Lancaster	1 st – Variable 2 nd – Permanent	D
5	Hotspot	Lightshaw	Permanent only	A
6	Control	Penrith	1 st – Permanent 2 nd – Variable	B
7	Hotspot	Fylde	Variable only	D
8	Control	Liverpool	1 st – Permanent 2 nd – Variable	C

Appendix 2

Behavioural Science Levers

Promote local gains and reassure on losses

Gains and losses

There is a lot to be said for the work that is going into and the thought that sits behind these changes, something that is echoed in participants' feedback. Framing and emphasising the choices as investments in the future for a better maintained/more resilient system places a 'gain frame' around the information and subsequent change – something that can have a powerful effect on perception.

Equally, to lose something can be incredibly painful for people to experience.

In fact, despite never thinking about it much before, the sheer notion that a seldom thought about treatment works will be closing down is enough to cause alarm in some customers.

The justifications around why this is happening however alongside the 'gains' that will occur once customers are being supplied by the larger site seems to have quelled any sense of unease for the majority.

Explaining frames: Homo sapiens' psychology holds some explanatory power here when understanding the power of different frames. To explain, watch this M&S advert – click [here](#).

Now answer this, would the same impact have been felt had the voiceover been done by someone else and “slow cooked short rib of beef finished with a sumptuous truffle jus” been described simply, but accurately, as “meat and gravy”?

It is unlikely and this illustrates the power of 'framing' which is relevant to this piece of research when exploring the impact that 'gain' and 'loss' frames can have.

Build on positive feedback regarding visual clarity

Saliency

The saliency bias in behavioural science describes our tendency to focus on items or information that are more noteworthy while ignoring those that do not grab our attention and which may be objectively more important.

Encouragingly, this tendency as it relates to the letter suggests that it could lead to optimal decision-making from a brand comms point of view, by drawing the eye to the most crucial piece of information even amongst those who confess they wouldn't read the letter in its entirety.

Furthermore, in contrast to the first iteration of the image, the subsequent iteration possesses a greater calming effect.

This principle's power could be further enhanced by the manipulation of different colours being used in the diagram.

Explaining saliency: Humans are no different to bees or peacocks. Why? Evolution has hardwired bees to be attracted to flowers of brighter colour and bigger size whilst peahens often choose peacocks whose tail is of a bigger size and shape.

Just like bees and peahens, human attention is also heavily influenced by what our attention is drawn to and what our attention is drawn to can be manipulated by making aspects more prominent, vivid, or personally relevant.

In short, if there are absolutely key takeaways that you want customers to see, make them stand out!

Avoid uncertainty

Expectation and uncertainty

Version A of the letter performs better when it comes to reducing uncertainty, although as seen on the previous slide (e.g. due to the numerous uses of “may”) it does not eliminate it entirely.

Nevertheless, it performs better than Version B which instils a greater sense of alarm in the reader.

Version A also benefits from a stronger and more concrete use of social norms which is powerful when we know that when people are uncertain, they'll most likely

look to others for behavioural guidance.

For example, *telling* the reader that “...many customers do not notice” in Version A versus *suggesting* that “Many customers may not notice” in Version B places completely different connotations on the content and alters how they are then subsequently perceived.

This further explains why Version A was the preferred choice.

Explaining expectation and uncertainty: The human brain tends to find uncertainty unsettling. When individuals make a purchase or subscribe to a service, they come in with specific expectations. For instance, when we place an order in a restaurant, our past experiences lead us to anticipate our food being served within approximately 15 minutes. If it takes longer, objections might arise; if it's quicker, suspicions may emerge.

From Domino's who include a tracking function so you can keep tabs on your pizza's progress, to countdown boards on platforms taking away the pain of train delays, if you can find ways off setting and updating customers' expectations this will only enhance their psychological comfort.

The message is most trusted from a local source

Messenger effect

There will never be universal approval of any one messenger, behavioural principles are best viewed as broad tendencies that operate across populations.

However, on balance, a local slant to the messenger is seen as providing a powerful sense of **genuineness**, **caring** and **connection**.

Contrasted with those that 'don't care' or who hold no real objection to any one positioning, our recommendation is for the local role

to be emphasised in order to benefit from the perceived relevance that the information would be imbued with based on its source.

Explaining the messenger effect: Imagine receiving an email demanding urgent action from your company's CEO vs. an intern – would you react more urgently to one request versus another? If the answer is yes, you're likely experiencing the impact of the messenger effect.

The messenger effect is a cognitive bias where we assess the validity or relevance of information based on who delivers it. Instead of evaluating the content objectively, our interpretation is influenced by our opinions of the source.

For more information

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