

WaterShare+ Group Panel Independent Review 2020–2025

WaterShare+


Pennon

About this review and its scope

This report provides an independent assessment by the WaterShare+ customer challenge panel of how South West Water delivered its 2020 to 2025 business plan, and how those lessons have shaped the plan for 2025 to 2030.

The WaterShare+ Group Panel is the Independent Challenge Group for Pennon Group's water businesses. It was established to represent customers and to hold the company to account for its performance and plans. The panel scrutinises evidence, challenges the company on their assumptions and delivery, and reports independently on what this means for their customers.

The panel's remit covers the WaterShare+ Group, including South West Water, Bournemouth Water, Bristol Water, the Isles of Scilly and, more recently, SES Water.

This review focuses on South West Water's performance during the 2020 to 2025 period. This includes the South West Water and Bournemouth Water areas, as well as the Isles of Scilly, which became part of the company's responsibilities during this period. Bristol Water is also included, but is reported separately for regulatory purposes and is therefore considered as a distinct region within this review.

SES Water was acquired by Pennon Group in 2024 and is not included in this 2020 to 2025 review period, but is referenced where relevant to future plans and performance. These arrangements reflect Ofwat requirements to maintain consistent reporting across original regional structures.

In simple terms, this review focuses mainly on South West Water, includes Bournemouth Water and the Isles of Scilly, reflects Bristol Water separately, and does not include SES Water.

South West Water

Provides water and wastewater services to Devon, Cornwall, and parts of Dorset and Somerset.

Bournemouth Water

Supplies drinking water to parts of Dorset, Hampshire, and Wiltshire.

Bristol Water

Supplies drinking water to the Bristol region and surrounding areas.

SES Water (Sutton and East Surrey)

Supplies drinking water to East Surrey, West Sussex, West Kent, and South London.



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1. Executive summary

This five-year review sets out the WaterShare+ group panel's independent assessment of how Pennon Group's water businesses performed between 2020 and 2025 against the promises in their business plans and regulatory obligations. It also explains how what we learned during this period has shaped the company's plan for 2025 to 2030, and how we will scrutinise delivery over the next period so customers can see whether real change is happening where they live. We take a whole-period view because what matters to customers is the direction of service, trust and value over time, not just year-by-year snapshots.

The period was unusually volatile. It included pandemic disruption, inflation and cost-of-living pressures, severe weather and drought, and rising public scrutiny of water companies and environmental performance. In that context, customers told us what mattered most was whether services stayed reliable, whether problems were handled well, and whether they could trust what they were being told. Over the five years, there were areas where performance fell short and confidence was damaged, alongside areas where customers saw progress and practical support. The company has also received the economic regulator Ofwat's top rating for its 2025 to 2030 business plan, marking the third consecutive time and reflecting strong customer engagement.

Based on the evidence we examined and what customers told us, some of the biggest shortcomings were in the areas that most directly affect trust. Pollution incidents were too frequent, and meeting discharge permit conditions at wastewater treatment works fell short in several years. On drinking water, the company did not meet its targets every year for reducing supply interruptions, leakage, or providing clear and consistent communication about water that did not look or taste right, even as some wider measures of performance were improving. The Brixham drinking water incident in 2024 became a clear test of incident readiness and reinforced the need for faster detection, rapid provision of alternative supplies, and communication that is timely, clear and customer-focused. We challenged the company on these issues throughout 2020 to 2025 because customers experience the impact directly, and trust, once lost, is harder to rebuild.

Customers also told us there were areas where the company delivered real benefits and where progress felt clearer. Affordability support expanded, and for much of the period average bill increases in the South West were kept below headline inflation, meaning bills fell in real terms. Across the wider company area, including the Bristol region, annual bill changes were smoothed to make increases more gradual and predictable for customers. WaterShare+ matured into a nationally recognised model, delivering direct benefits through bill credits or free shares while giving around 80,000 customers an additional voice as shareholders. Performance in preventing sewer flooding inside homes remained among the strongest in the sector, and bathing water

outcomes were supported by greater transparency, including published real-time information on spills and beach conditions that customers could check for themselves.

This review is not only about the past. It also sets up what customers should expect next, and what we will do as the panel to track progress. The company's 2025 to 2030 plan is presented as a response to the lessons of 2020 to 2025, and we will judge it by delivery and by the difference customers experience in practice. Priorities include reducing spills from storm overflows and improving how well treatment works meet the required standards for safely and effectively treating water and wastewater, so it is clean, safe and meets environmental rules, with continued transparent monitoring to track progress. We will be looking for sustained reductions that show up in outcomes, not just activity. The plan also proposes investment to strengthen drinking water resilience through advanced treatment and targeted renewal of pipes, and we will expect this to translate into fewer interruptions, better reliability, and a service that customers can trust day to day.

The plan includes a major programme for smart metering and helping customers use water more efficiently, and supporting more resilient supplies over time. We will look for this to be implemented in ways that are fair, well explained and practical for households, with measurable benefits for leakage, resilience and bills over time. It also sets out the largest package of affordability support so far, including better use of data to reach people who need help and simpler, more proactive access. We will expect that support to be easy to find, easy to take up and effective in reducing financial stress for customers as bills rise.

Looking ahead, bill increases are only justified if customers see real improvements where they live – in homes and communities, in rivers, and along the coast. Over the next five years, customers reasonably expect fewer spills, clearer information, better tasting water with less discolouration, fewer interruptions, faster responses during incidents, and meaningful support for those who need help with bills. By 2028, customers should be able to see tangible progress at company priority locations, including cleaner bathing waters and rivers with fewer spills, with clear local information showing where spills have happened, whether water quality may be affected, and whether things are improving over time. Drinking water should feel more dependable, customer services should resolve issues right first time more often, and the priority services offer – extra support for customers who need additional help, for example due to age, disability or vulnerability and affordability support should be easier to access and more responsive when people need help.

As an independent panel, our role is to keep attention on what customers experience day to day and to make scrutiny visible. Over 2020 to 2025 we strengthened our approach, including regular public sessions where customers could question senior leaders, and we helped shape the 2025 to 2030 plan so it reflects customer priorities.

The proof now will be delivery. We will continue to challenge constructively, track whether actions are completed and publish what we find so customers can see progress and hold the company to account.

To make improvement easier to see, we expect straightforward local dashboards for major programmes such as overflow reduction, treatment upgrades, mains renewal and metering. These should show what work is planned, when it is expected to happen, how it may affect local communities during construction, and whether it is on track. They should also show the expected benefits, including clear “before and after” outcomes, so customers can see what is improving in their own area.

We also expect transparent reporting on the reach and impact of affordability support.

After incidents, customers should receive clear, accessible summaries explaining what happened, what has changed and how improvements are being put in place.

We recognise that delivery in 2020 to 2025 was influenced by factors outside the company’s control, including the pandemic, inflation, drought and very wet winters. Even so, good planning, well-prepared teams and well-rehearsed incident plans can reduce the impact when things go wrong.

The next five years begin with more ambitious commitments and significant public scrutiny. The test is to turn credible plans into measurable outcomes that customers can feel, while explaining clearly what to expect, when and why.

The WaterShare+ group panel will continue to bring customer interests and concerns to the fore, challenge constructively and support transparency so customers can see progress.

2. Introduction

Purpose and scope.

This review summarises what the company promised for 2020 to 2025, what happened in practice, what worked well, and what needs to be improved. It sets out how those lessons have shaped their business plan 2025 to 2030. The review is a product of the WaterShare+ panel's independent scrutiny and dialogue with the company and is intended for customers, but we also expect it to be useful to the company, stakeholders and regulators.

Why a five year perspective matters

Annual reporting is necessary but not sufficient: performance in the round is best seen over several years, because improvements are rarely linear and the drivers of change – weather, demographics, supply chain capacity, regulation, and internal organisational stability – interact in complex ways. A whole-period view allows us to recognise progress that is building but not yet visible in the short-term, and to identify where recurring problems point to deeper root causes.

Context.

The period was unusually volatile. The pandemic disrupted access to the infrastructure used to collect, treat, store and distribute water and to manage wastewater, including pipes, treatment works, reservoirs and pumps. It also interrupted supply chains and customer engagement. Inflation and the broader cost of living crisis increased anxiety about bills. A severe drought in 2022 to 2023, followed by very wet winters, placed additional strain on water resources and wastewater networks. Public concern about the health of rivers and the sea rose sharply, and the performance of water companies came under intense media and political scrutiny. During this time the company completed the merger with Bristol Water and extended its service area to the Isles of Scilly. It also began a company-wide change programme to simplify how the business operates, so teams work together more consistently and customers experience more reliable service.

Panel voice and independence.

The WaterShare+ panel's role throughout the period was to champion customer interests, challenge the company constructively, and press for transparency and evidence. We observed customer research, examined methodologies, commissioned independent assurance where appropriate, and held regular private and public meetings with executives and technical experts. The panel also hosted open forums where customers could put questions directly to the chief executive and senior leaders.

How this review is organised.

The next section explains how we formed our view. We then provide an executive reflection on 2020 to 2025 before setting out, in narrative form, what was promised and what happened across the key commitments: affordability and fair charging,

responsiveness to customers, drinking water quality and reliability, available and sufficient resources, reliable wastewater services, protecting the environment, and resilience. We draw out the cross-cutting themes that shaped performance and, finally, look ahead to the new business plan period 2025 to 2030, setting out the panel's priorities for oversight and engagement.

3. How we formed our view

Evidence base.

Our assessment draws on five years of scrutiny of company documents and plans, independent expert input from the Environment Agency, the Consumer Council for Water and Natural England, and direct dialogue and challenge with the chief executive and other executive directors. When appropriate we also engaged with the board and the chair. We examined published performance reports and plans, observed and questioned customer research, kept detailed challenge logs and held frequent discussions in public and in private with executives and technical leads. Where needed, we commissioned independent assurance to test the assumptions, methods and results.

Customer voice.

We put customer experience at the centre of our work. We analysed survey results, observed engagement sessions and created opportunities for customers to put questions directly to senior leaders. We looked across different sources of evidence, and over time, to understand what customers were consistently telling the company. We tested whether the evidence was reliable, whether the same themes continued to emerge as more research was carried out, and whether customer insight led to real changes in how services were designed and delivered. We then followed up to assess whether those changes made a practical difference to customers' day-to-day experience. Going forward, the panel recognises there needs to be a stronger shift from consulting customers to involving them more actively, with customers treated as partners in shaping, testing and delivering the outcomes that matter most to them.

Regional representation.

Following the merger with Bristol Water, the panel changed its membership and ways of working so local voices stayed strong. We met in both areas, invited local organisations to take part, and made sure papers and discussions reflected the issues that matter in each place. We looked at results by area rather than only at company level. We asked for data that showed differences in networks, water sources, geography and customer views. Where experiences diverged, we sought evidence based explanations, not assumptions. We then checked that decisions and plans would work for each region in practice, including smaller communities such as the Isles of Scilly.

Contextual intelligence.

We paid attention to wider trends and the external conditions that shaped 2020 to 2025. These included the operational impacts of the pandemic, the cost of living crisis, drought and the water we need and use, and a rapid rise in public concern about the environment. These factors do not excuse underperformance, but they do help define what was realistic, where risks should have been anticipated, and what good risk management should look like.

Independence and fairness.

We stay independent and evidence led. Our role is to challenge and support the company to deliver better outcomes for customers. We aim to give a balanced assessment. We recognise what has been delivered, we ask for explanations and we set clear expectations for improvement. Our focus is on outcomes that customers can see and feel. When the company provides new evidence, such as fresh data, improved analysis or revised plans, we consider it based on what the evidence shows. We look for early signs that changes are working in practice and we say so when they are not.

4. Reflections on strengths and weaknesses

Customers had clear expectations shaped by the company's business plan promises. They expected reliable, good tasting drinking water. They expected wastewater services that prevent flooding and protect the environment. They expected fair and affordable bills with honest updates when things go wrong. Our view is that delivery was mixed. There were real strengths to build on, and there were persistent shortfalls in areas that matter most to customers. The pages that follow set out both and what needs to change.

Strengths to build on.

Against this backdrop, there were areas where performance delivered clear benefits for customers.

One of the clearest was affordability. The company's sustained focus on affordability provided meaningful support to many households during a challenging economic period. Another clear strength was performance on internal sewer flooding. This – where wastewater backs up into homes – was among the strongest in the sector. It reflected close monitoring of the network, planned maintenance, and rapid, practical support for customers when incidents occurred. Bathing water outcomes were also a clear area of strength. Designated beaches consistently met required standards, with most rated good or excellent. This was supported by the publication of live spill and beach status information, enabling customers to make informed choices before visiting. Finally, customers benefited directly when the company performed better than expected, through bill credits or free shares. This was delivered through the innovative WaterShare+ scheme, which also strengthened the customer voice by establishing an independent panel to ensure customer priorities are reflected in decision-making.

Where performance fell short.

Alongside these strengths, several important outcomes did not meet customer expectations.

Pollution incidents happened too often, and the company did not always follow the rules on how wastewater should be treated and what can be safely discharged to protect rivers and the environment, although this improved towards the end of the five-year period. At the same time, public awareness of and concern about discharges from combined sewage overflows increased significantly, even when those discharges were within permitted limits. In practice, customers experience these events as pollution regardless of how they are classified, and this difference in perception became a focus for increased investment to reduce overflows in the new business plan and beyond. Performance issues were also evident in drinking water services. Customers experienced more supply interruptions than planned, and targets to reduce leakage and reduce the need for customers to get in touch about taste, smell

or colour concerns were not met consistently, even though some wider measures of drinking water performance improved. Taken together, these shortcomings undermined customer confidence. Rebuilding trust requires that these outcomes are acknowledged clearly and placed at the centre of future improvement efforts.

Brixham as a significant event.

One event in particular brought the importance of safe drinking water into sharp focus. The Brixham drinking water incident showed that resilience matters most when it is tested. Evidence later confirmed that *Cryptosporidium* infections in the local population were linked to contamination within the water system. The company mounted a large operational response and worked closely with regulators, and it shared early learning with other organisations. Customers will still ask simple questions. Why did this happen? How will you prevent it happening again? What will be different next time? Once investigations allow, the company should publish a clear customer report that explains the causes, the protections now in place and the milestones that will show progress.

Context matters, but does not excuse performance.

The five years were marked by pandemic disruption, inflation, drought and then very wet winters. These factors raised risks and increased scrutiny across the country. They do not excuse poor outcomes. The best protection against volatility is strong planning, stable teams, clear roles and regular practice of incident plans. Where the company invested in these basics, results were more resilient.

Setting the direction for 2025 to 2030.

The new plan for 2025 to 2030 picks up the right themes. It focuses on safe and clean drinking water, fewer spills from storm overflows, healthier rivers and coasts, more renewable energy on sites, a larger smart metering programme to help reduce demand and the biggest package of affordability support so far. The challenge now is disciplined delivery at pace. That means fixing problems first time, keeping customers informed in a timely way and reporting progress openly so people can see and feel the difference where they live. Achieving this will depend on applying the lessons from the 2020 to 2025 delivery period, when a number of significant commitments to customers were not fully met.

5. What was promised and what happened

5.1 Affordability and Fair Charging

What was promised.

From a customer's point of view, the promise was straightforward: water bills should be fair and affordable wherever possible, and support for customers who are struggling to pay should be clear, easy to find and simple to access. The plan also set a promise to eliminate water poverty, using the regulatory definition that no household should spend more than 5% of its income on water bills. This was to be achieved by expanding targeted support for customers who needed it most. The company was the only water company to make this specific promise, as part of the 2020 to 2025 business plan.

What happened in 2020 to 2025.

For South West Water households, bills increased more slowly than overall inflation during this period. This assumes similar levels of water use, as most customers have a meter and what people actually pay depends on how much water they use, as well as annual changes to unit prices. Put simply, many customers did not see the same sharp price rises in their water bills as they did in other household costs. Once inflation is taken into account, water bills were lower in real terms than they had been a decade earlier.

Across the wider company area, bills did not follow exactly the same pattern for all customers. Bournemouth Water and Bristol Water had separate charging arrangements, and Bristol Water became part of Pennon Group plc during the period. This means customers in different parts of the group could see different year-to-year changes in their bills. The important point for customers is that affordability is not only about the total bill, but also about whether changes are steady and predictable. Smaller, more stable changes are easier for households to plan for than sudden increases, particularly when other costs are rising.

More support was also made available, and more customers received it. Around £124 million of direct help was provided to households over the period. For customers, this showed up as things like discounted bills for those on low incomes, flexible payment arrangements, payment breaks, help with debt, checks to make sure people were claiming the benefits they were entitled to, and practical water-saving advice and devices. The company also worked with community partners so people could get help through organisations they already trust.

A practical improvement during the period was better use of data to identify households likely to struggle. Where eligibility allowed, that meant some customers

could be offered support earlier and with fewer steps, rather than having to find the scheme themselves and complete long forms at a point of stress.

What this meant for customers.

For many customers, bills were more predictable and support was easier to access than it had been in the past. For those who needed help, the range of support available widened and the company improved how it reached people, including through partnerships with other organisations. As a result, the company met its promise that no household would be in water poverty, as defined by the regulator. This was a significant achievement. At the time, it was a sector-leading commitment, and its success has since influenced other water companies, which have adopted similar approaches in their 2025 to 2030 business plan.

Looking ahead, however, the challenge of affordability has not gone away. From 2025 to 2026 onwards, customers will feel increased pressure on their bills. There are two main reasons for this, both of which customers will notice directly. First, a long-standing £50 Government contribution towards South West Water bills is ending, which immediately increases the amount customers have to pay. Second, much higher levels of investment are planned for the next period. Customer research showed that people wanted persistent issues such as water supply resilience and pollution incidents to be tackled, and that they accepted there would be a cost associated with the level of investment needed to achieve this. Even so, the impact on bills is significant, with an average increase of around 28% projected over the next five years.

The effect of this is straightforward. More households will need help, and more people will worry about whether their bills are affordable. This makes it essential that support is easy to find, easy to access and quick to put in place.

Lessons learned.

Customers do not experience affordability support as a policy or a scheme. They experience it as how it works for them. They want to understand what they are eligible for, find the right help without difficulty, apply easily, receive a decision quickly and feel that they are being treated fairly throughout. The start of the 2025 to 2030 period showed that large changes to bills can trigger a sharp increase in calls and enquiries. If this is not planned for, customers wait longer, information becomes less consistent and frustration increases.

Clear and simple explanations about why bills are changing, what support is available and what customers should do next are essential to maintaining trust. This was not achieved as well as hoped during the 2025 billing period. However, the 2026 billing round has gone much more smoothly, showing that lessons are being learned and improvements are being made.

We also saw that support works best when it is low effort. Targeted invitations, short forms, trusted local partners and quick decisions made the biggest difference. Just as importantly, the company needs to reduce the need for customers to chase or to tell their story multiple times. When people are worried about paying, delays and repeat contacts add stress.

Company plan for 2025 – 2030.

The company's plan includes its largest affordability package so far, worth more than £200 million. The promise to give sufficient support to keep all household's out of water poverty has been repeated. From a customer perspective, the promise here is also that help will be simpler and more proactive. That means clearer routes into support, a more consistent offer across regions, and earlier outreach using improved data so customers are not left to struggle until they reach crisis point.

The plan also commits to clearer communication about price changes and more visible community outreach. Alongside this, the economic regulator for water and sewerage services in England and Wales, Ofwat, expects an increase in the number of households supported through social tariffs, as well as additional shareholder support through hardship funds and matched payments. Customers should be able to see that these commitments translate into practical, accessible help.

Panel focus on risks and what we will look for.

The risk for customers is that rising bills and changes to charging approaches increase financial pressure, while support is not simple, timely or easy to access in practice. If this happens, customers may struggle to get the help they need, and trust may be weakened at a time when it matters most.

In particular, we will look for clear evidence that the company is delivering two practical outcomes.

1. As bills rise, customers may become confused or frustrated if they do not understand why charges are changing or where to get help. If this happens, trust will fall and more customers will need to get in touch. We will look for clear, well-timed communication in plain English that explains why bills are changing and what customers should do next. Customers should be able to access support quickly, without long waits, repeated contact or being passed between teams.
2. Changes to tariffs and metering approaches may not work fairly for all households in practice. Some households have high essential use, such as larger families or people with medical needs, and may have limited ability to reduce consumption. We will look for clear safeguards, clear explanations, and transparent reporting that shows who benefits and who may be disadvantaged. Where evidence shows customers are worse off through no fault of their own, we will expect the approach to be adjusted. The current trials include a rising block tariff, where prices increase with higher usage; a seasonal tariff, where prices are higher during peak demand

periods; and a peak seasonal tariff, where higher charges apply to very high summer use. These are designed to encourage efficient water use while protecting essential use. If successful, they may be expanded or refined, with the Panel monitoring outcomes to ensure they are fair and work as intended in practice.

5.2 Responsive to customers

What was promised.

From a customer point of view, the promise is simple. When customers need to get in touch with their water company, it should be easy to reach someone, easy to get a clear answer, and easy to get the problem sorted properly. Customers expect issues to be fixed first time, bills to be accurate, and updates to be timely and honest when things go wrong. Customers who need extra help should be identified quickly and supported in a practical way, especially during incidents and interruptions.

What happened in 2020 to 2025.

From 2020 to 2025, more customers needed to get in touch with South West Water. Despite this, customer satisfaction did not improve at the same pace, with scores remaining among the lower-performing companies throughout the period. This gap pointed to rising expectations for faster responses, clearer communication and more effective first-time resolution, so that customers do not need to come back more than once to get an issue resolved.

Performance was mixed depending on the type of service. The service that supports developers, builders and self-builders to connect new homes and business sites improved, and the company moved into the upper half of industry rankings. This progress was driven by simpler processes, clearer routes into support and stronger capability in teams, with good practice shared across regions.

For household customers, the picture was less positive in the South West. A key concern for the panel is that customer experience did not improve enough across the period and ended among the lower-performing companies, ranked 15th out of 17. Bristol Water remained stronger at around 5th. These results reflect both the quality of the experience when customers needed help and the wider picture of trust during a period of heightened scrutiny. Views were also influenced by wider public concern about pollution, as well as national debate about dividends to shareholders and senior executive remuneration, including bonus payments. Across both the South West and Bristol regions, these wider concerns appear to have shaped how some customers judged value for money.

Reassuringly for customers who need extra help, more people joined the priority services register during 2020 to 2025. By 31 March 2025, more than 130,000 customers in the South West were registered for tailored support, which was around a quarter higher than the year before. This growth was supported by staff training,

targeted outreach and partnerships with more than 400 trusted local organisations, helping the service reach more people who benefit from extra support. This is important progress. However, it also highlights a wider challenge, because the overall day to day experience for household customers in the South West still did not improve enough across the period.

What this meant for customers.

For customers, the practical difference is how easy it feels to get help when you need it. In some parts of the business, customers saw services become simpler and more responsive. In other areas, particularly for household customers in the South West, too many customers still experienced delays, repeat contact, or a service that did not feel consistent.

At the same time, it is reassuring that more customers who need extra help were reached. The priority services register grew during the period, which matters because it is designed to make sure customers who need additional support are treated appropriately during interruptions and when they contact the company.

Lessons learned.

Customers judge service most sharply when they need help. When something goes wrong, the basics matter more than slogans. Tell people quickly what has happened, what it means for them and what they need to do. Keep updates coming and say when the next update will be.

Customers also expect issues to be resolved properly first time. Repeated calls, hand offs between teams, or unclear answers quickly erode trust. The company needs to identify the most common reasons customers contact it and reduce them at source, not simply handle each case as a one off.

Finally, much of the pressure on customer service is predictable. Billing cycles, severe weather, and major work programmes all bring higher contact volumes. If the company plans ahead and communicates early, customers are less likely to be left waiting and more likely to feel informed and supported.

Company plan for 2025 to 2030.

The company says it will focus on getting the basics right more consistently. It plans to make it easier for customers to find information and complete common tasks online, while ensuring support is available for customers who prefer phone or need extra help. It also plans to strengthen planning for predictable surges in demand so customers are not left waiting when contact volumes rise.

The company also plans clearer and more local updates on major works so customers know what is happening in their area, how long it will take, and what to expect during the work. Support for customers in vulnerable circumstances will continue to expand,

with a focus on making the priority services register easier to join and improving the quality of tailored support.

Panel focus on risks and what we will look for.

The risk for customers is that higher bills and a larger programme of work lead to more disruption and more need to get in touch, while customer service and the day-to-day experience do not improve quickly enough. The panel will look for clear evidence that the company is turning its promises into day-to-day improvements. This means changes that customers can see and feel, such as faster responses, clearer communication and issues being resolved properly first time. Trust will depend on whether these improvements are consistent in everyday service.

In particular, we will look for clear evidence that the company is delivering four practical outcomes.

1. Customers can access support easily and have issues resolved first time more often. We will look for shorter waiting times, fewer repeat contacts, and clear evidence that the main reasons customers have to chase are being addressed.
2. Communication during incidents and interruptions is faster, clearer and more consistent. Customers should receive prompt updates in plain English that explain what is known, what it means for them, what they should do, and when the next update will be provided.
3. Communities affected by major works receive clear and timely local information. This should include information before work starts, during delivery and after completion, with realistic timelines, clear signposting to support, and follow-up that shows what has improved as a result.
4. The priority services register works effectively in practice. It is not enough for numbers to increase. Customers who rely on extra support must receive it when it matters, and the company should show how it is working with partners to reach people who may otherwise miss out.

5.3 Clean, safe and reliable drinking water

What was promised.

From a customer point of view, the promise is simple. The water from your tap should be safe, clear and good tasting. It should be there when you need it, with fewer interruptions. The company should also waste less water through leaks. When something does go wrong, customers expect clear and timely information, including what they should do and when normal service will return.

What happened in 2020 to 2025.

Between 2020 and 2025, the underlying safety of drinking water improved. The Drinking Water Inspectorate uses a measure that shows the risk of water quality failures, and this improved significantly in the South West over the period. By 2024, it had reached

its best level to date. Bristol Water also ended the period in a stronger position after earlier weaknesses.

However, customers did not always experience these improvements in their day-to-day service. Even where regulatory performance improved, customers judge drinking water by the quality, reliability and confidence they experience at the tap. On that measure, performance did not meet expectations, and closing this gap must be central to the company's future improvement plans.

The company did not meet its targets every year for reducing supply interruptions, or for reducing customer contacts about water that did not look or taste right. Leakage levels did fall, but not by as much as planned. Reductions were around 9% in the South West and around 5% in the Bristol region compared with the starting point, well short of the 15% reduction that had been committed to.

This was partly due to the impact of the pandemic and the drought, which meant that more work on the network took place later in the period. Large-scale flushing of pipes restarted in 2024 across more than 300 local network areas once drought restrictions were lifted. This type of work can help reduce discolouration and improve how water looks and tastes for customers.

The drinking water incident in Brixham in 2024 was a defining moment for customers. It required a major operational response and close working with regulators. It also underlined the importance of making the network more resilient, including faster detection of problems, quicker provision of alternative water supplies, and clear, regular updates for customers throughout an incident.

What this meant for customers.

Despite the Brixham incident, drinking water continued to meet strict safety standards for the vast majority of customers. That matters, and it should never be taken for granted. But customers judge drinking water services on more than safety alone. They notice when the supply is interrupted, when water looks discoloured, or when it does not taste as expected. They also notice when updates are slow, unclear, or hard to find.

In practical terms, the period saw a gap between improving underlying safety measures and the everyday experience customers expect. The Brixham incident also showed how quickly confidence can be damaged when an unusual event occurs, and how important it is that customers receive fast, clear guidance about what is happening and what they should do.

Lessons learned.

Customers judge drinking water services on two things. First, the water must be safe and meet the required standards. Second, it must be reliable and look and taste right day to day. Both are essential for trust.

The period showed that resilience depends on several things working well together. Water sources need protecting. Treatment works need to run reliably. Pipes need to be in good condition. Plans for incidents need to work in practice, not just on paper. When one part is weaker, customers feel the impact quickly through interruptions, discoloured water, poor taste, or confusing information.

The period also highlighted practical steps that improve everyday experience. Regular flushing and targeted replacement of ageing pipes can reduce discolouration and improve taste and smell issues. These programmes work best when they are steady and planned, rather than only intensified after problems arise.

Brixham sharpened these lessons further. It underlined the need for earlier detection, faster rollout of alternative supplies, clearer and more frequent updates, and follow up communication that explains what happened, what has changed, and how the company will reduce the risk of a repeat.

Company plan for 2025 to 2030.

The company's plan for 2025 to 2030 describes a step change in drinking water resilience and reliability. It includes major upgrades at treatment works, targeted replacement and repair of older pipes, and expanded work to reduce risks to raw water before it reaches treatment.

The plan also commits to clearer information for customers about how risks are managed, what improvements are being delivered, and when customers should expect to see benefits. The aim is to rebuild confidence through delivery and clear progress updates.

Specific actions include targeted replacement of around 122 kilometres of older cast iron water mains and the removal of tens of thousands of lead service pipes. The plan also includes major treatment upgrades using advanced processes, with schemes tailored to different parts of the region and a longer term programme for the Isles of Scilly.

The company also plans to continue research into emerging contaminants, including substances sometimes referred to as forever chemicals. The aim is to stay ahead of risk and to make sure monitoring and treatment remain fit for the future.

Panel focus on risks and what we will look for.

Serious drinking water incidents are rare, but when they happen the impact on customers can be high. There is also a wider risk that day-to-day performance does not improve consistently enough, with too many interruptions, ongoing issues with water that does not look or taste right, and communication that does not meet customer expectations. Together, these risks can undermine confidence in a service that customers rely on every day.

In particular, we will look for clear evidence that the company is delivering two practical outcomes.

1. We will look for protections across the water system that are robust at every stage, from water sources to treatment works and the pipe network, so incidents can be prevented or managed effectively. We will also look for regular exercises that test incident response in real conditions, including occasional unannounced drills. Customers should be able to see that arrangements are in place to provide alternative water quickly and at scale if needed.
2. Communication will be a key test. During any incident and in day-to-day issues, communication must be clear, timely and consistent, with updates that explain what is known, what is still being checked, and what customers should do. We will also look for clear follow-up information afterwards that explains what happened, what has changed, and how improvement will be tracked over time.

5.4 Available and sufficient resources

What was promised.

From a customer point of view, the promise is straightforward. There should be enough water to meet day to day needs, even in dry weather. Customers told the company repeatedly that restrictions such as hosepipe bans are one of the most visible and frustrating service failures. The plan for 2020 to 2025 set an ambition to avoid restrictions by reducing leaks and reducing the average amount of water used per person.

What happened in 2020 to 2025.

In practice, parts of the South West did face restrictions during the period. Severe dry weather, higher than expected demand, and changing patterns in where and when water was used meant that temporary restrictions were introduced in some areas for the first time in decades.

The clearest example was the drought in 2022 – 2023. In the Colliford supply area, and later across parts of Devon, demand rose well above forecasts during prolonged hot, dry periods. At its peak, demand reached around 8% above forecast levels, exposing the limits of existing supply arrangements when extreme dry weather coincided with higher household use. This pressure was reflected in reservoir levels, with Colliford's storage falling below 20% capacity by October 2022.

After the drought, the company took steps to strengthen supplies. It brought new water sources into use, improved the ability to store water during the winter for use later, progressed new treatment assets, and prepared a desalination option that could be used if needed. These actions supported recovery after the drought and helped strengthen resilience.

Targets to reduce average household water use were not met across regions. This reinforced a key point: having enough water is not only about new sources and treatment works, but also about how water is used, particularly during peak summer periods. In response, the company combined formal drought controls with practical support and engagement. The *Stop the Drop* campaign in Cornwall followed one of the lowest rainfall periods in 130 years and challenged customers to help recharge reservoirs to 30% by 31 December, a target that was achieved, with customers receiving a £30 bill credit. This later evolved into the *Save Every Drop* campaign, rolled out more widely to engage households, visitors, businesses and the tourism sector in reducing water use.

What this meant for customers.

For customers, restrictions are felt immediately. They affect gardens, car washing, and everyday routines. They also raise understandable questions about fairness, especially when customers are being asked to save water while they see leaks or bursts locally.

The period showed that even when water remains safe and available for essential needs, a drought can still lead to restrictions if demand rises sharply. It also showed that recovery and resilience work takes time and is often not visible to customers unless it is explained clearly.

Customers also need confidence that the company has a plan for both supply and demand. In other words, enough water coming into the system and sensible steps to help customers use water efficiently without feeling blamed or left on their own.

Lessons learned.

Customers respond best when they are treated as partners and given practical help. It is not enough to ask people to use less water. Customers need clear and timely messages during dry periods, simple tools to understand their use, and confidence that metering and billing information is accurate.

The period also showed that planning needs to reflect real world behaviour. Hot weather changes how water is used, not just by households but also by tourism, leisure activities and seasonal businesses. Plans need to allow for these spikes and communicate honestly about what customers can expect and why.

Finally, the company needs to show that it is doing its part. That means reducing leaks, preparing supply options, and explaining the actions it is taking, alongside asking customers to use water wisely.

Company plan for 2025 to 2030.

The company's plan for 2025 to 2030 places a major focus on managing demand and reducing leakage so restrictions are less likely. A large smart meter programme sits at

the heart of this approach. The company says smart meters will improve bill accuracy, help customers better understand and manage their water use, and identify leaks more quickly, while significantly increasing metering coverage. The plan targets metering levels of over 90% in Devon, Cornwall and Bournemouth, and over 80 % in Bristol regions, with a longer-term ambition to meter 94% of households and 98% of non-households by 2050.

The plan also includes targeted water efficiency support, continued leakage reduction, and work to strengthen resilience through options such as improved transfers between areas and further supply solutions where needed. Where compulsory metering applies, the company says it will put in place clear and customer friendly safeguards.

Panel focus on risks and what we will look for.

The risk for customers is that hotter, drier summers and population growth increase pressure on supplies, while changes expected from metering and behaviour do not happen quickly enough. The panel will look for clear evidence that the company's approach is working in practice and is fair.

In particular, we will look for clear evidence that the company is delivering five practical outcomes.

1. We will look for clear action to reduce the risk of restrictions during dry periods and strengthen long-term resilience. This includes clear public updates on the water supply position, what the company is doing, and what customers may need to do to help protect supplies.
2. We will look for progress on leakage reduction, because customers will not accept being asked to save water if leaks are not being tackled at pace.
3. We will look at whether smart meters are delivering practical benefits for customers and the environment. This includes whether they are helping to reduce per person water use, improve the accuracy of bills, provide clear and useful information, and support customers to make informed choices about their water use.
4. We will look for fairness and safeguards for households who may have high essential water use, including larger families and customers with medical needs. These customers must not be disadvantaged and support should be easy to access.
5. We will look at communication, especially during dry weather. Customers should receive early, clear guidance on what is happening, what action the company is taking, and what they can do that will genuinely make a difference. This should also link clearly to wider water efficiency efforts, including Ofwat's Water Efficiency Fund campaign, where relevant, to support behaviour change and reduce long-term water scarcity risks.

5.5 Reliable wastewater services

What was promised.

For customers in South West Water's wastewater service areas, the promise is about protecting homes, streets, and the environment. Wastewater should be carried away reliably. Sewers should not flood homes or gardens. Treatment works should operate properly so pollution is prevented. When things do go wrong, customers expect a fast response, clear updates, and action that stops the same problem happening again.

What happened in 2020 to 2025.

There were two different experiences for customers, depending on the type of flooding and where they live.

Flooding inside homes remained one of the strongest areas of performance. This is when sewage backs up into a property through toilets, sinks, or drains. Performance here was among the best in the sector across the period, supported by better monitoring, targeted maintenance and rapid customer support.

By contrast, flooding outside homes did not improve enough. This includes flooding in gardens, roads and public spaces caused by sewer problems. Targets were missed in most years, although performance started to improve as more cleaning, monitoring and preventative work was put in place.

A second issue was how well wastewater treatment works met their permits. In plain terms, permits set legal limits on the quality of treated wastewater that can be safely released back into rivers, the sea or the wider environment. Performance fell short of what was expected for much of the period, although it improved later on following targeted maintenance, work to restore treatment areas such as reed beds, wetlands or lagoons, and closer monitoring of important equipment and sites.

Other wastewater measures were more stable. Odour complaints were broadly stable despite weather pressures, and blockages reduced in places where cleaning programmes and customer education were consistent.

What this meant for customers.

For customers, the biggest impacts are simple and very real.

Flooding inside a home is one of the worst failures a customer can experience, and strong performance here matters because it prevents serious distress, damage and disruption. The company's stronger performance on internal flooding meant fewer customers faced that experience than would otherwise have been the case. However, flooding outside homes and repeat problems in local areas still affected customers. Even when sewage does not enter a property, external flooding can disrupt travel,

affect public spaces, create unpleasant conditions and damage confidence that the system is being maintained properly.

Treatment works underperformance matters because it is linked to environmental harm. Customers may not see permit numbers, but they do see the outcomes in rivers, streams and coastal waters, and they expect wastewater to be treated properly before it reaches the environment.

Lessons learned.

The period showed what works when performance improves. The strongest results came where the company consistently did four things.

First, it used monitoring to spot problems early rather than waiting for failures. Second, it fixed the root cause, not just the symptom, so the same site did not fail again. Third, it kept maintenance and renewal programmes steady and well planned. Fourth, it supported customers quickly and consistently when something went wrong.

Those disciplines were applied most successfully to preventing flooding inside homes. The lesson is that the same disciplined approach needs to be applied more widely to external flooding hotspots and to how treatment works are operated and maintained.

Company plan for 2025 to 2030.

The company's wastewater plan for 2025 to 2030 is presented as a major step up in investment and delivery. It includes more monitoring across the sewer network, targeted upgrades to reduce flooding and pollution, and greater use of sustainable drainage to reduce the amount of rainwater entering sewers in the first place.

A major focus is reducing spills from storm overflows and cutting pollution. The plan includes around £760 million of investment for storm overflow and pollution reduction. It also includes more monitors certified to environmental standards, upgrades at priority treatment works, and measures designed to improve river water quality over significant stretches.

The plan also includes continued work with customers and partners to reduce sewer misuse. That includes tackling fats, oils and grease poured down sinks, and items that should not be flushed.

Panel focus on risks and what we will look for.

The risk for customers is that large wastewater programmes create disruption, but improvements are not felt quickly enough where people live. The panel will look for evidence that the company is delivering the promised change in a way customers can see, and that it is prioritising the places with repeat problems.

In particular, we will look for clear evidence that the company is delivering six practical outcomes.

1. Fewer incidents that affect homes and communities. We will look for sustained reductions in flooding, especially repeat locations.
2. Clear progress on treatment works performance. We will look for improved compliance with permits and fewer pollution events.
3. Storm overflow reductions that lead to visible environmental and social benefit. We will look for progress at priority locations that matter to customers, including rivers and coastal areas.
4. Local plans that customers can understand. Before work starts, communities should be told what will happen, how long it will take, and what support is available during disruption.
5. Customer communication that is timely and practical. During incidents and during construction, customers should receive clear updates, including what is known, what is being done, and when they will hear more.
6. Prevention as well as response. We will look for evidence that monitoring, planned maintenance, and targeted renewals are reducing emergency repairs and preventing repeat failures.

5.6 Protecting the environment

What was promised.

From a customer point of view, the promise is clear. Rivers and the sea should be cleaner. Pollution should reduce. Beaches should be safe to use. Nature and wildlife should be better protected. Customers also expect openness, so they can see what is happening locally and whether things are improving.

What happened in 2020 to 2025.

There were areas of real progress, alongside areas where performance still fell short.

Designated bathing waters met the required standards across the period, and most sites were rated good or excellent. The company also became more open with information. Monitors were installed on all storm overflows so their use could be recorded, and near real-time spill and beach status information was published so customers could check conditions before they visited.

Nature and catchment work also progressed. Biodiversity commitments were met and, in some cases, exceeded. Delivery included improving the condition of protected habitats, planting large numbers of trees, restoring peatland, and working with farmers and landowners to reduce pollution before it reaches rivers and reservoirs. These actions help in practical ways, including improving water quality, supporting wildlife, slowing the flow of water and storing carbon. Catchment programmes, including *Upstream Thinking*, showed the value of tackling problems at source by working with

farmers, landowners and partners. This included nature-based measures such as soil and nutrient management, reduced run-off, peatland restoration, wetlands, woodland planting and buffer zones to help protect rivers, lakes and groundwater.

However, key environmental outcomes still did not meet expectations. Pollution incidents remained too frequent, and performance at wastewater treatment works did not always meet permit requirements in several years. Plans and early improvements emerged later in the period, but performance still lagged customer expectations and the standards required in some locations. Customers also do not see frequent storm overflows as acceptable, even where they are permitted. As the company itself has recognised, this requires a step change in both the quality and transparency of reporting, and in reducing how often overflows occur and how long they last.

What this meant for customers.

For customers, the difference is what people can see and feel.

Many customers experienced strong bathing water results at designated beaches, and they benefited from being able to check live information before a visit. That helps people make informed choices and supports trust through transparency.

At the same time, customers continued to see too many pollution incidents and too many examples of wastewater systems not performing as they should. Even when the technical detail sits in permits and compliance scores, the impact of storm overflows for customers is real. It shows up as concern about river health, local bathing and recreation, and confidence that wastewater is being treated properly.

The period showed an important distinction. A beach can meet bathing water standards overall, while customers still feel rightly concerned about spills, pollution events, and the health of rivers and the wider coastline. Both matter, and customers expect progress on both.

Lessons learned.

Transparency helps, but it is not enough on its own. Publishing data builds trust only when customers can understand it and see clear evidence that problems are reducing over time. Customers need context in plain English, and they need visible progress, not just more monitoring.

The period also showed that nature-based solutions and catchment work are valuable because they reduce risks before they reach the network and treatment works. *Upstream Thinking* is an important example of this approach, bringing together partners, farmers and landowners to improve water quality, support biodiversity and make catchments more resilient. However, this work does not remove the need for the basics to be done well. Spills, pollution incidents and permit performance still depend

on disciplined operation, targeted upgrades, and steady maintenance in the places that cause repeat problems.

Where performance improved, it was usually because the company combined early detection, practical fixes, and consistent local follow-through. Customers responded best when information was clear and local, and when actions taken were visible and explained.

Company plan for 2025 to 2030.

The company's plan for 2025 to 2030 sets out a major programme to reduce spills from storm overflows, improve treatment works performance, and strengthen monitoring and transparency.

A central part of the plan is a large investment programme for storm overflow and pollution reduction, including hundreds of monitors certified to environmental standards, upgrades at priority treatment works, and additional schemes to remove nutrients such as phosphorus. The intention is measurable improvements to river water quality over significant stretches, alongside fewer spills and fewer pollution events. Customer research is clear that bathing beaches are the top priority for customers, and reducing storm water spills in these areas will be the first focus.

The plan also continues the company's catchment and nature-based work which applies natural solutions to improve raw water quality before it reaches treatment works. This means working with farmers, landowners and partners to reduce pollution at source, using measures such as better soil and nutrient management, peatland restoration, wetlands, tree planting, woodland creation and riparian buffer zones. The programme is expected to expand across more catchments, including Bristol Water catchments for the first time, and to support South West Water's commitment to plant a further 300,000 trees from 2025 to 2030. This matters because nature-based work can improve water quality, support wildlife, slow the flow of water, store carbon and help make catchments more resilient.

The plan also commits to keeping data open and improving local engagement. The company says it will publish accessible dashboards so communities can see where work is happening, what has been completed, and what outcomes are being achieved.

Panel focus on risks and what we will look for.

The risk for customers is that large environmental programmes create disruption, but improvements are not felt quickly enough in the places that matter most. The panel will look for evidence that the company is prioritising repeat problem locations and turning investment into measurable change.

In particular, we will look for clear evidence that the company is delivering seven practical outcomes.

1. We will look for fewer pollution incidents and clear evidence that they are reducing year on year, especially in repeat locations.
2. We will look for improved performance at wastewater treatment works, including stronger compliance with permits and fewer failures that lead to harm.
3. We will look for storm overflow reductions that lead to visible benefits, with a clear focus on rivers, beaches and shellfish waters that matter most to customers and the environment.
4. We will look for clear local plans and honest communication before and during construction. Customers should understand what is happening, how long it will take, and what support is available during disruption.
5. We will look for transparency that customers can use. Data should be timely, explained in plain English, and linked to clear milestones so communities can track progress.
6. We will look for delivery resilience. Climate variability, supply chain constraints and access challenges can delay work. The company should show how it is managing these risks, and it should be clear when plans change and why.
7. We will look for evidence that catchment and nature-based work is delivering practical benefits. This includes reducing pollution at source, improving soil and water management, restoring habitats, planting trees in the right places, and showing how this work contributes to cleaner water, more resilient catchments and better outcomes for nature.

5.7 Resilience

What was promised.

From a customer point of view, resilience means one thing. Services should keep working, even when conditions are tough. That includes storms, floods, heatwaves, drought, power interruptions, major bursts, and unexpected incidents. When disruption cannot be avoided, customers expect the company to be ready. They expect fast action, clear information, practical support, and a return to normal service as quickly as possible.

What happened in 2020 to 2025.

Resilience outcomes over 2020 to 2025 were mixed. In some areas, the company strengthened its ability to cope with shocks. In other areas, major events exposed weaknesses that customers could feel directly.

On the drinking water side, some resilience measures were delivered, but major incidents and periods of extreme weather highlighted vulnerabilities. Supply interruptions increased during severe weather and major bursts, showing that parts of the network were not as robust as customers would expect and that response plans did not always translate into consistent delivery on the ground.

On the wastewater side, resilience planning progressed and some flood risk measures improved through targeted upgrades. The company performed well in some areas, such as sludge treatment and disposal, which improved significantly over the period. However, challenges persisted elsewhere, particularly around pollution incidents and meeting discharge permits at treatment works.

For the Isles of Scilly, the picture was more positive. Resilience strengthened through better automation, more robust sampling, and increased staffing. These changes improved day to day stability and the ability to respond quickly when issues arise.

What this meant for customers

Customers experience resilience through the best days and the worst days. When resilience is strong, customers do not notice it, because services continue as normal. When resilience is weak, the impact is immediate and disruptive. Customers experience longer interruptions, more uncertainty, and slower recovery after incidents. They also experience greater anxiety when communication is unclear, inconsistent, or delayed.

The period showed that improvements in plans and processes only matter if they work in practice during real events. Customer confidence is tested most during incidents, when people need clear answers, practical support, and confidence that the situation is under control.

For customers in the Isles of Scilly, increased staffing and improved systems mattered because the local environment and logistics make services more vulnerable to disruption. For customers across the wider region, extreme weather events and major bursts highlighted the importance of preparedness, rapid deployment, and clear communication that explains what is happening and what customers should do.

Lessons learned.

The key lesson is that resilience is not one project. It is a set of basics done well, every day, and tested under pressure. Resilience depends on assets being in good condition, monitoring systems that spot problems early, and the ability to respond quickly with the right people, equipment, and supplies. It also depends on clear roles and responsibilities so that when something goes wrong, everyone knows who is leading, who is doing what, and how decisions are made. Being ready also means practising. It is not enough to have written plans. The company needs regular exercises that test incident response in real conditions, including occasional unannounced drills. These should cover practical logistics such as alternative water supplies, delivery routes, staffing, welfare support, and the communications needed to keep customers informed. Finally, resilience depends on people and skills, not just infrastructure. Stable teams, trained incident leaders, and clear accountability improve performance when pressure is high.

Company plan for 2025 to 2030.

The company's plan for 2025 to 2030 includes continued investment in resilience. This includes site resilience, flood protection, and island infrastructure, alongside clearer publication of resilience plans and progress updates. The company also says it will treat incident readiness as a stronger discipline. That includes regular exercises to strengthen preparedness and to embed learning into routine operations. The plan also includes modernising sludge treatment to reduce pollution risk while increasing renewable energy generation. The company describes this as supporting both resilience and sustainability, with generation at steady state sufficient to power thousands of homes.

Further targeted investment is planned to strengthen long term resilience across both water and wastewater services, including the ability to cope with more extreme weather patterns.

Panel focus on risks and what we will look for.

The risk for customers is that more extreme weather, coastal risks, and longer wet or dry periods increase disruption, while readiness does not improve fast enough. The panel will therefore look for evidence of practical resilience, not just planned resilience.

In particular, we will look for clear evidence that the company is delivering five practical outcomes.

1. Fewer and shorter interruptions during severe weather and major bursts, with clear evidence that weak points in the network are being addressed.
2. Incident response that works in practice. We will look for regular exercises, including occasional no notice drills, and we will expect to see improvements in how quickly the company can mobilise people, equipment, and alternative supplies.
3. Communication that customers can rely on. During incidents, customers should receive timely updates that explain what is known, what is still being checked, and what customers should do. Updates should be consistent across channels and include clear times for the next update.
4. Stronger resilience in wastewater services that prevents repeat harm. We will look for improvements that reduce flooding risk, reduce pollution events, and strengthen performance at treatment works during stressful conditions.
5. Strong engagement with communities and local authorities. Effective resilience depends on local knowledge and coordination, especially in areas with unique geography. We will look for evidence that plans reflect what communities experience on the ground, and that customers know what to expect before, during, and after major events.

6. Cross-cutting themes

Across 2020 to 2025 we heard the same messages from customers in different ways and in different places. These themes sit behind many of the results in this review. They help explain why some areas improved while others did not. They also point to practical actions the company can take that make a real difference to day to day service and trust.

Organisational stability and capability.

Customers do not see internal restructures, but they feel the impact when service becomes less consistent. When teams change often, knowledge is lost, decisions slow down, and problems are less likely to be fixed properly first time. Mergers and reorganisations can bring benefits such as shared skills and more consistent ways of working. They can also create disruption at exactly the time continuity matters most.

Where the company protected stability, service was more reliable. Clear roles, the right skills in the right places, experienced people leading incident response, and consistent ownership of assets reduced confusion and delay. Over the next five years, stability should be treated as part of improving service, alongside investment in pipes and treatment works. That means retaining key people, building capability, and making responsibility clear from the senior leadership team through to front line teams.

Incident management as a discipline.

Trust is shaped most on the company's worst days. When something goes wrong, customers want three things quickly. What has happened, what it means for them, and what they should do next. They also want confidence that the company is in control and that help is available, especially for customers who need extra support.

Being ready for incidents needs to be practised, not just written down. That includes clear roles, regular exercises, and strong monitoring so the company has a clear picture of what is happening as events unfold. It also includes practical readiness, such as being able to deploy alternative water supplies quickly and provide visible welfare support. After an incident, customers expect a clear explanation of what happened, what has changed, and how the company will prevent a repeat.

Transparency customers can use.

Customers value openness, but information only builds trust when it is clear and useful. Publishing data on spills, beach status and performance can help communities understand what is happening locally and can support quicker response. Transparency works best when it comes with plain explanations and local context. For example, when monitoring improves, recorded spill counts can rise even if the underlying situation is not getting worse. Customers need that explained simply. The goal is practical transparency. Local information that helps people make choices, shows what work is under way, and makes progress easy to track over time.

Behaviour changes and demand management.

Keeping enough water available is not only about new sources and infrastructure. It also depends on how water is used, especially during hot weather when demand rises. Tools such as smart meters can help, but they do not change behaviour on their own.

Customers need information they can trust and act on, presented simply. They also need fairness. Some households can reduce use more easily than others. Some have high essential use, including larger families and customers with medical needs. Demand programmes need clear safeguards and practical support so customers can take part without worry or disadvantage.

Finding root causes and managing assets before they fail.

Customers want fewer repeat problems, not repeated apologies. One of the clearest examples of what works was preventing sewage flooding inside homes. Strong performance here came from better monitoring, early detection, planned maintenance, targeted renewals, and fast customer support when problems occurred.

The same disciplined approach needs to be applied more widely. That includes areas where sewers flood outside homes, places with repeated discolouration, and treatment works that fall short of permit conditions. When root causes are identified and assets are managed before they fail, customers see fewer emergencies, fewer disruptions, and fewer repeat incidents in the same locations.

Balancing short term fixes with long term prevention.

Some measures reflect immediate outcomes customers notice, such as spills, treatment works performance, supply interruptions and flooding. These require strong day to day control and timely upgrades. At the same time, lasting improvement often comes from preventing problems at source. This includes reducing runoff, protecting raw water quality, restoring habitats, and slowing the flow of water into sewers during heavy rain.

Catchment work and nature based solutions can deliver long term benefits and can be cost effective over time. The key is balance. Customers need the basics to improve now, and they need confidence that longer term prevention work is expanding with clear results that are measured and explained.

7. What customers should see next: priorities and risks

The 2025 to 2030 period begins with major commitments and a clear need to rebuild confidence through delivery that customers can see. For customers, it will not be enough to publish plans or targets. What will matter is whether things improve where people live, on their bills, at their taps, and in local rivers and beaches.

The biggest priorities are clear. On the environment, the focus is on reducing spills from storm overflows in the places that matter most, including bathing and shellfish waters and sensitive inland sites, and on improving performance at wastewater treatment works so permit requirements are met more consistently. On drinking water, the focus is on upgrading key treatment sites, replacing and repairing the sections of pipe most likely to cause interruptions and discolouration, and being better prepared for incidents by turning recent lessons into routines that are practised and checked. Support for customers who struggle to pay is also due to expand, with better use of data to identify customers who may need help, simpler routes into support, and a more consistent offer across all areas.

Managing demand and reducing leakage will be a major part of the approach. A large smart meter programme is intended to help find leaks faster, improve billing accuracy, and give customers clearer information about how much water they use. This needs to be paired with practical tools and advice that help households and businesses make changes without confusion, and with fair safeguards for customers who have high essential use.

The acquisition of SES Water should also strengthen capability across the company group. SES Water brings experience in AI-enabled leakage detection and smart network management, which should help the company identify problems earlier, manage water networks more efficiently and target investment more effectively. For customers, the test will be whether this capability leads to visible improvements during 2025 to 2030, including faster leak detection, fewer interruptions, better planned work and reduced disruption in local communities.

From the panel's perspective, the test is clear. We will look for a line of sight between activity and outcomes customers can feel. That means fewer spills and pollution incidents, cleaner rivers and beaches, fewer supply interruptions, fewer contacts about discoloured water, and support that reaches the people who need it without delays or barriers.

Delivering at pace will bring disruption in some communities as construction work increases. Maintaining trust will depend on the basics being handled well. Stable teams, realistic schedules, and early communication will matter. Customers should be told what work is planned in their area, when it will happen, what disruption to expect, and where to go for help if they need it. Publishing clear local delivery plans for major schemes will help

customers see progress, understand the trade-offs, and hold the company to its promises. Trust grows when plans are matched by milestones, and when communities can see change over time in the places they care about.

The next section explains how the WaterShare+ panel works and how customers can see the panel's scrutiny in action.

8. WaterShare+ Group Panel – Independent Challenge Group

The WaterShare+ independent panel was established as part of an innovative scheme launched in 2020 by South West Water's parent company, Pennon Group plc. The Panel gives customers a stronger, independent voice in how the company performs and makes decisions, representing customer priorities and holding the company to account through visible, ongoing scrutiny. The wider WaterShare+ scheme also gives customers a direct share when the company performs better than expected, through bill credits or free shares. This gives customers both a meaningful voice and a direct stake in strong performance.

Since its introduction, the panel has become a visible and influential part of how the company is subject to independent scrutiny. Its role is taken seriously within the business, with direct engagement from senior executives and regular opportunities for challenge and engagement, including public meetings where customers can question leadership directly. At the same time, the panel's focus has evolved from reviewing plans to testing whether commitments are delivered in practice and whether customers can see and feel the difference. This includes challenging the company where performance has fallen short, following up on actions, and making scrutiny more visible to customers.

Looking ahead, this role will become even more important. Ofwat's Consumer Involvement in Decision-Making Rule, introduced from April 2026, places a clear expectation on water companies to embed customer insight into decisions that affect bills, service quality and protections. The panel will play a central role in ensuring this happens in practice, with the company committed to supporting this through a forward engagement plan. This role is reflected in how the panel operates across the Group. It provides independent oversight across Pennon Group's water businesses, including South West Water, Bournemouth Water and Bristol Water, and, following its acquisition in 2024, SES Water. Its purpose is to ensure that performance, investment and decision-making reflect customer priorities and are tested openly. This approach will continue through the 2025 to 2030 period, with the panel working alongside the SES Water customer panel to ensure strong and consistent customer challenge across all areas. This combination of independent challenge, customer engagement and direct customer benefit ensures that customer voice is not only heard, but has a clear and continuing influence on how the company performs and delivers in practice.

Methods and access.

The panel's work is structured, evidence-led and focused on outcomes. From the outset, detailed challenge logs have been maintained, recording the issues raised, the company's responses, the actions agreed and whether those actions were completed. This creates a clear line of accountability and ensures that issues are followed through, not revisited without progress. Engagement with the company is regular and direct. The panel meets frequently with executive directors and technical leads,

increasing the pace of engagement when new issues or incidents arise. Just as importantly, customers and community groups have been given direct access to senior leaders through public forums. These sessions, which began online during the pandemic and have continued through regional and in-person meetings, have been well attended and provide a visible route for customers to challenge the company directly. They also ensure the panel remains grounded in what matters most to customers in practice.

Scrutiny is supported by access to the information, people and independent assurance needed to test performance robustly. The panel observes engagement sessions, examines customer research, and commissions independent assurance where specialist input is required. It also draws on insight from the Environment Agency, the Consumer Council for Water and Natural England. Full access to strategic plans, performance data, expert advisers and senior executives is complemented by direct engagement with the company's independent technical auditor, Jacobs, who has confirmed that reporting is reliable and accurate.

This approach is sustained over time. In the most recent reporting year, the panel held 22 meetings, including seven in public, and continued its scrutiny into late 2025 and early 2026. This enables the panel to assess not only what is reported, but how the company responds to challenge and whether improvements are maintained.

Subgroups and technical depth.

As the scope and complexity of the work has increased, the panel has strengthened its ability to examine issues in depth. Recognising the breadth and technical complexity of the company's 2025 to 2030 business plan, the panel established two dedicated subgroups to support its scrutiny: one focused on customers and affordability, and the other on technical and environmental matters. This structure enabled more detailed consideration of key areas affecting customers, including affordability support, smart meter safeguards, storm overflow programmes, treatment works performance and bathing water outcomes. It also enhanced the panel's ability to examine evidence in depth, challenge assumptions and assess the robustness and deliverability of the company's proposals.

Mergers and representation.

As Pennon Group plc has expanded its market share in the water sector, the panel has adapted to ensure representation remains strong and relevant. Following the integration of Bristol Water, membership and ways of working were adjusted to reflect regional differences and ensure local perspectives were fully understood. The acquisition of SES Water in 2024 has further strengthened this approach. Close working between the WaterShare+ panel and the SES Water panel ensures that independent customer challenge remains consistent and effective across all areas, while respecting the distinct context of each region.

Influence on the 2025 to 2030 plan.

The panel has played a direct role in shaping the company's plans for 2025 to 2030. Acting as the independent challenge group, it has challenged the company to align investment with customer priorities, protect affordability and set clear, measurable outcomes. This has included pressing for greater transparency on storm overflows and pollution reduction, stronger readiness for incidents, and clear, customer-focused safeguards in the smart meter programme. The panel has also supported the development of open data and clearer local delivery plans so that communities can see what is happening in their area and track progress over time.

What works.

Experience over the past five years shows that challenge is most effective when it is visible, evidence-based and sustained. Three factors have made the greatest difference: open access to evidence, so discussions are grounded in facts; clear, plain English reporting, so customers can understand what is being claimed; and consistent follow-through, so issues are resolved rather than revisited. The WaterShare+ model reinforces this by linking performance to tangible outcomes for customers. When the company performs better than expected, customers benefit directly through bill credits or shares. For those who choose shares, this also brings the rights of shareholders, including access to information and a vote on key decisions. This strengthens both participation and accountability.

What we will do next.

The next phase is focused firmly on delivery. The plan for 2025 to 2030 is now in place, and customers will judge progress by what they experience in practice. The panel will continue to play an active role in ensuring that customer voice is embedded in decision-making. Building on Ofwat's *Consumer Involvement in Decision-Making Rule*, the approach has been refined to focus on the areas that matter most, with clearer opportunities for challenge and co-creation, and stronger links between the panel and the company board.

Scrutiny will prioritise the issues customers have identified as most important:

- Pollution, storm overflows and treatment works performance.
- Drinking water reliability, taste and interruptions.
- Affordability, fairness and support for customers in vulnerable circumstances.
- Clear engagement and communication during major programmes and incidents.

The panel will look for early evidence that customer engagement is shaping decisions and improving outcomes. It will not wait until the end of the period to raise concerns. Instead, it will continue to test whether activity is translating into real, visible improvements and will report publicly so customers can see progress and hold the company to account.

9. Conclusion

Across 2020 to 2025, customers saw a mixed picture. There were areas of clear progress, including stronger support for customers who struggle to pay, good performance in preventing sewage flooding inside homes, and strong bathing water results at designated beaches supported by more open information.

At the same time, too many outcomes fell short of what customers were promised. Pollution incidents remained too frequent, performance at wastewater treatment works did not meet expectations in several years, and customers experienced too many interruptions and concerns about water that did not look or taste right. The Brixham incident was a defining moment and reinforced how important it is to be ready, to communicate clearly, and to provide practical support quickly when something goes wrong.

The 2025 to 2030 plan sets out a major step up in investment and a clear set of commitments. It focuses on fewer spills, better treatment works performance, safer and more reliable drinking water, and stronger support for customers who need help with bills. These commitments matter, but customers will judge them by results, not by promises.

As an independent customer panel, our role is to keep the focus on what customers experience day to day. We will look for clear progress that people can see where they live, including fewer pollution incidents, cleaner rivers and beaches, fewer supply interruptions, clearer communication during incidents, and support that reaches those who need it without barriers or delay. We will also expect local updates that make it easy for communities to track what is happening, what has been completed, and what difference it has made.

Trust will be rebuilt through consistent delivery over time and through openness when things do not go to plan. We will continue to challenge constructively, follow through on actions, and keep reporting publicly so customers can see progress and hold the company to account.

Appendices

Appendix A: How we reached our view (methodology and assurance)

A1. What we used (sources).

We based this review on a wide range of evidence, including:

- The company's published performance reports and updates
- Business plan documents for 2020 to 2025 and for 2025 to 2030
- Our panel papers and challenge logs, showing what we asked and how the company responded
- Records from public meetings and customer forums
- Customer research and assurance reports shared with the panel
- Independent expert input where appropriate

A2. How we assessed performance (our approach).

We looked at the full five year period, not just single year results. This matters because performance can rise and fall year to year, and customers experience change over time. In reaching our view, we focused on:

- Trends over several years, so we could see whether things were improving or not
- Whether the story in words matched the results in data
- Whether changes the company said it had made were showing early signs of improving outcomes for customers
- Where results changed, what new evidence explained the change and whether it stood up to scrutiny

A3. What this review is and is not (limitations).

This review is not a formal audit. It does not replace the statutory roles of regulators or formal assurance processes. Our purpose is to represent customers, to challenge constructively, and to provide a balanced view. We focus on what customers were promised, what happened in practice, and what needs to change.

Appendix B: How we will track delivery in 2025 to 2030 (monitoring and scrutiny)

B1. What we will focus on.

We will keep regular scrutiny sessions on the areas that matter most to customers and where confidence needs to be rebuilt. This includes:

- The environment, including spills from storm overflows, pollution incidents, and performance at wastewater treatment works

- Drinking water reliability and customer experience, including interruptions and water that does not look or taste right
- Affordability support, including whether help reaches customers quickly and fairly as bills rise
- The rollout of smart meters, including billing accuracy, customer understanding, and safeguards for households with high essential use.

We will increase scrutiny during higher risk periods, such as extreme weather, major incidents, and peak construction seasons.

B2. What evidence we will use.

We will use published performance information and local dashboards. We will also request targeted evidence on priority topics so we can understand what has changed and whether it is working. Examples include:

- Before and after results in areas with repeated sewer flooding
- Local spill trends and progress at priority bathing waters and river locations
- Customer experience during bill changes, incidents, and major works

We will also use customer feedback from public meetings and engagement, so we can test whether reported performance matches what customers experience day to day.

B3. How we will report and hold the company to account.

We will continue to publish summaries of our public sessions and to keep a clear record of the challenges we raise, the actions expected, and the company's progress against them. We will encourage the company to publish clear local updates for major programmes so customers can see what is happening in their area, what disruption to expect, and what improvement should follow. Where we see material risks to delivery, we will say so. We will also be clear about what we expect to change and what evidence we will look for next.

Appendix C: Acknowledgements

The panel thanks the customers, community partners and stakeholders who contributed views during 2020 to 2025; the independent experts who provided specialist assurance; and the company's teams who engaged openly with challenge and requests for evidence.