

UNITED KINGDOM · WATER

What AI tells customers about UK water

We asked ChatGPT, Google AI Overviews and Claude the questions bill-payers actually ask about sewage, bonuses, bills and public ownership — then counted who they named, and how they spoke about them.

Customers are asking the machine, not the search results page

54%

of UK adults now use AI tools

ChatGPT, Copilot or Gemini. It rises to 79% of 16–24s and 74% of 25–34s.

Ofcom, April 2026

5×

growth in UK visits to ChatGPT

1.8 billion UK visits in eight months, up from 368 million the year before.

Ofcom, December 2025

48%

of tracked searches return an AI Overview

Up 58% year on year. The answer now sits above the links.

BrightEdge tracker, early 2026

The take-home: a bill-payer asking “which water company is worst?” increasingly gets one answer naming a handful of companies, not ten blue links. Whatever that answer says is what they hear — and no one in the company’s comms team wrote it.

Five things bill-payers actually ask about

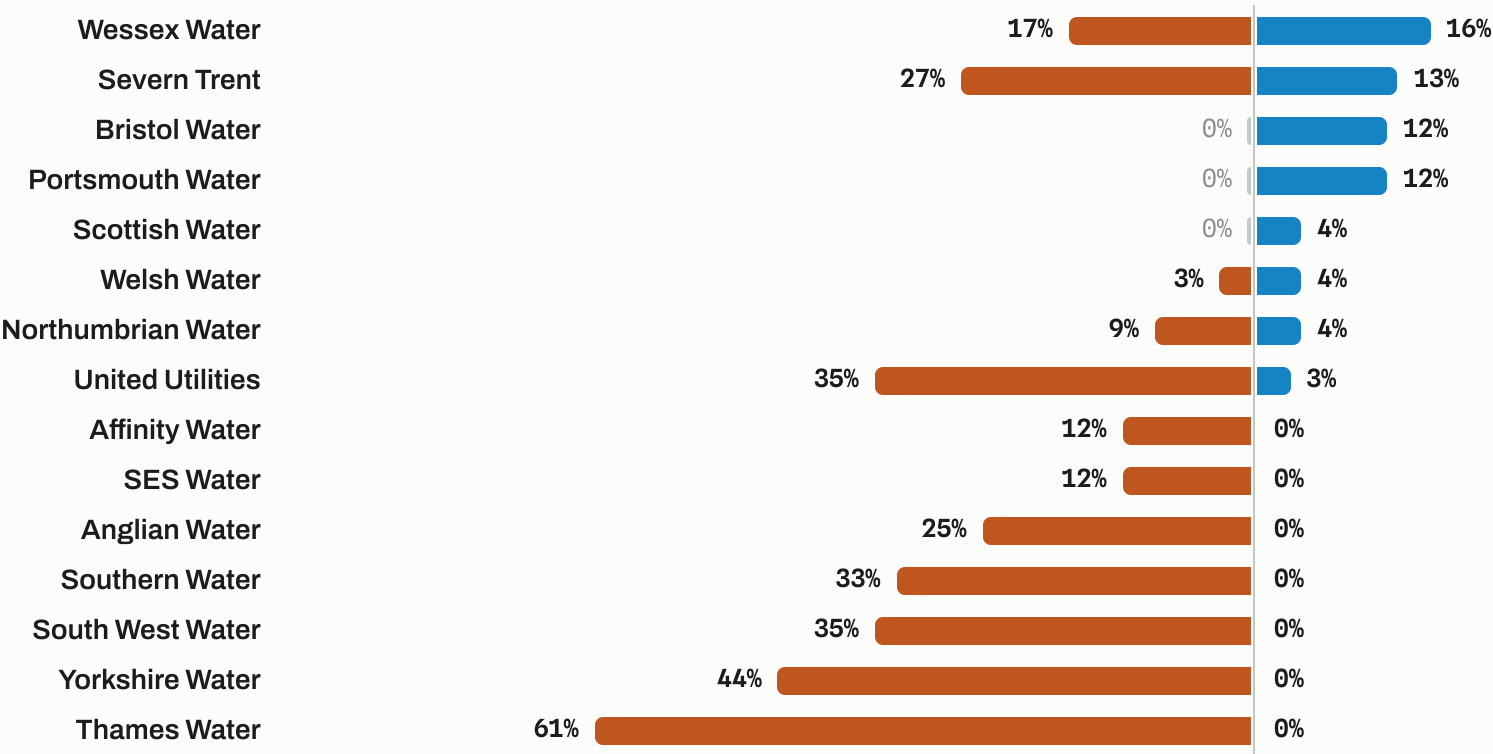
Each subject put to all three assistants, repeatedly. Who came out of it best, and who came out of it worst.

THE SUBJECT	COMES OUT BEST	COMES OUT WORST
“Which water company is best, and which is worst?”	Wessex Water 80% Severn Trent 67%	Thames Water 87% South West Water 73%
“Who discharges the most sewage?”	No company praised	United Utilities 93% Yorkshire Water 87%
“Who pays the biggest bonuses and dividends?”	No company praised	Thames Water 87% Anglian Water 80%
“Can I claim compensation or refuse to pay my bill?”	No company praised	No company singled out
“Should water be renationalised?”	Welsh Water 13% Scottish Water 13%	Thames Water 60%

The take-home: only the best-and-worst question produces a clear winner. On sewage and on bonuses, no company is spoken well of anywhere. And on bills and compensation, not one water company is named at all.

Who the assistants back, and who they warn about

Share of AI answers that speak **well** of each company, and share that speak **badly** of it.



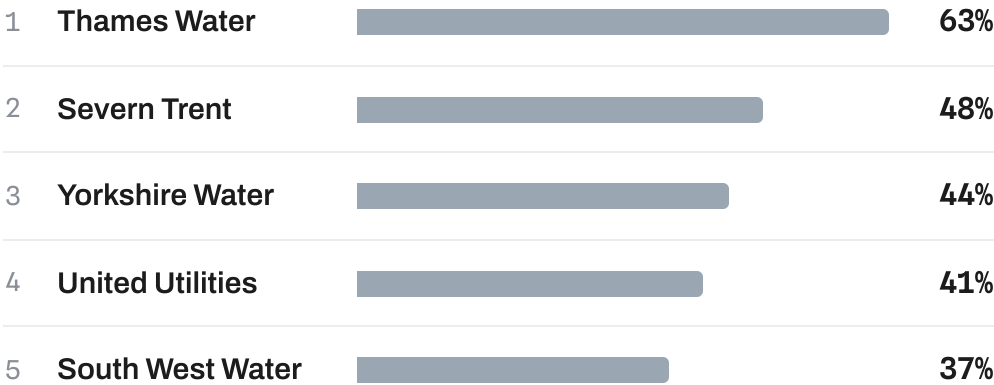
The take-home: this chart barely has a good side. Seven of the fifteen companies are never spoken well of once, and Thames Water — the most-named company in the audit — is criticised in three answers out of five. The only companies never criticised are three of the smallest.

Being named is not the same as being recommended

The five companies AI names most often, against the five it speaks well of most often.

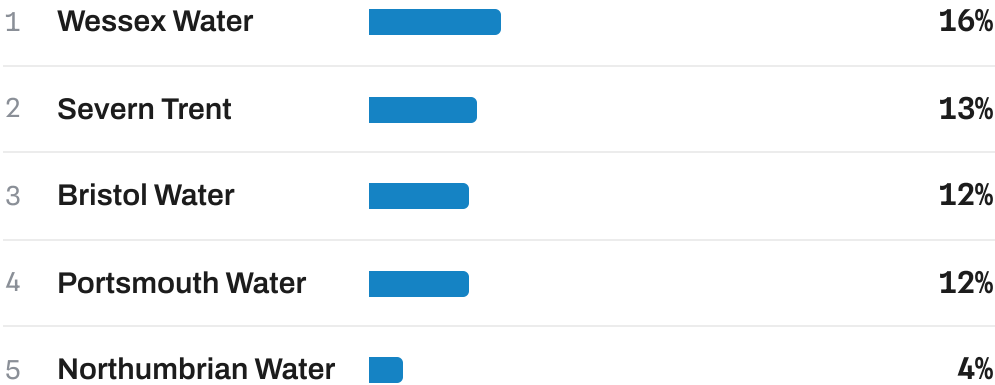
NAMED MOST OFTEN

Share of answers naming each company



SPOKEN WELL OF MOST OFTEN

Share of answers speaking well of each company



The take-home: the two lists share one name. Four of the five most-named companies appear nowhere on the right-hand list, and the best-regarded companies are the ones customers have mostly never heard of. In water, being visible and being liked are almost opposites.

This is a sector-wide problem, not a company one.



76% **Three in four mentions of a water company are negative.**
Across every subject and every assistant. Only one mention in six is positive.

0 **Seven companies are never spoken well of. Not once.**
Thames Water is the most-named company in the audit and is praised in no answer at all.

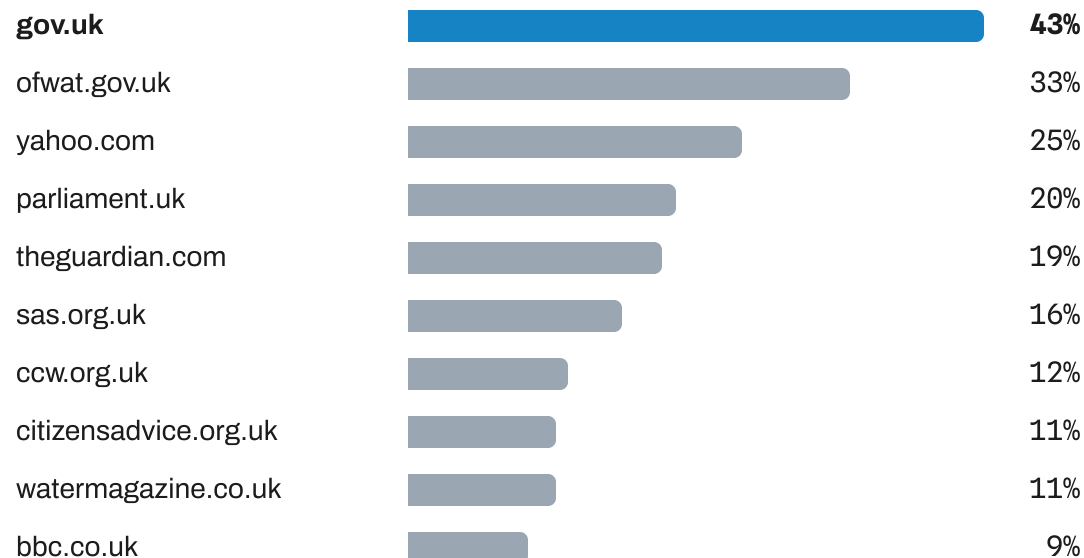
93% **On sewage, no company comes out of it well.**
United Utilities and Yorkshire Water take the most criticism, but nobody is defended.

0 **On bills and compensation, no company is named at all.**
The one practical question customers ask, and Ofwat, CCW and Citizens Advice answer it instead.

3 **Only three companies are never criticised.**
Bristol Water, Portsmouth Water and Scottish Water — and each is named in about one answer in ten.

Government data and campaigners write the answers

Share of AI answers citing each site.



THE BLIND SPOT

5%

is the most any water company's own site is cited

Six company sites are cited at all, none above one answer in twenty. Government data, Ofwat and campaign groups do the rest.

The take-home: the answers are built from published performance data and campaign material. Environment Agency ratings and Ofwat reports supply the numbers; Surfers Against Sewage and Parliament research supply the framing. Company communications barely feature.

The answer is becoming the complaint

Today AI tells customers who is worst. Soon it will help them act on it.

NOW

It recommends

The assistant names the worst performers. The customer reads the answer and forms a view, but does nothing with it.

BEING BUILT NOW

It starts acting

Google, OpenAI, Amazon and Microsoft are all building ways for an assistant to use a website itself. For a monopoly utility that means filing the complaint, assembling the compensation claim and citing the regulator's own rules — with the customer never clicking anything.

WHAT THAT CHANGES

The verdict becomes the volume

Customers cannot switch supplier. What they can do is complain, claim and campaign — and an assistant that does the paperwork turns a bad reputation into casework.

The take-home: this is early, and none of it is switched on by default. But water is the sector where it matters most: customers have no supplier to switch to, so the only actions left are complaints, claims and political pressure — all of which get easier the moment an assistant will do them for you.

Five things a water comms team can actually do

1 **Treat the Environment Agency and Ofwat releases as the reputation**

gov.uk and Ofwat together are cited in more answers than every news outlet combined. Star ratings and spill figures become the answer the week they publish.

2 **Take the one question nobody has answered**

On bills and compensation, no water company is named at all. Clear, published guidance on refunds, the guaranteed standards scheme and bill support is an open goal.

3 **Stop defending the sewage number and start publishing the trend**

No company is spoken well of on sewage anywhere. A single-year figure cannot be argued with; a credible multi-year trend, independently checked, is something an assistant can quote.

4 **Engage the campaigners, because AI already does**

Surfers Against Sewage is cited in one answer in six — more than the BBC. Its framing carries into answers whether or not anyone responds to it.

5 **Accept that your own site is not the lever**

No company site is cited in more than one answer in twenty. What changes the answer is what the regulator, Parliament and the campaign groups publish about you.