

The QS guide to utilities in the North West



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Introduction



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If you're a Quantity Surveyor looking ahead, the next big opportunity isn't in towers or fit-outs; it's under your feet.

Pipes, cables, grids and energy networks are where the real money - and momentum - now sit.

Utilities has long been the quiet engine of UK construction. But that's changing fast. AMP8 alone is unleashing £70 billion of investment, alongside record National Grid upgrades and the rise of hydrogen and carbon-capture projects. For QS's, that means one thing: long-term frameworks, complex risk, and serious opportunity.

The North West is the epicentre. United Utilities' £13.7 billion programme, plus energy and water resilience projects across Manchester and Liverpool, are creating the UK's most in-demand commercial market; London-level salaries, without the London chaos.

This guide isn't about engineering. It's about positioning; where value is shifting, what skills are in demand, and how to make your next move count. Whether you're a civil's QS ready to pivot or already in utilities and aiming higher, this is your roadmap to stay relevant as the market transforms.

Because while others wait for the next commercial boom, the smart ones are already following the flow of capital, and the capital is flowing straight into utilities.



1. Why this guide matters

The UK utilities sector is about to go through what can only be described as a once-in-a-generation spending spree. Between AMP8, carbon infrastructure, and energy grid upgrades, the money is flowing and the demand for proper commercial brains has never been higher.

Here's the problem: some QS's still think utilities is too niche, too technical, or just a bit boring. That kind of thinking is quietly costing people career-defining opportunities. This guide isn't here to teach you how a water main works. It's here to show you where the smart QS's are heading, how they're getting noticed, and why getting your name in early beats applying late every single time.

If you're working the commercial world and fancy a lane change, now's the time. The utilities boom is happening whether you like it or not, and the people who move first will be the ones laughing later.

This guide will help you:

- Spot where the value's shifting in utilities (spoiler: it's not just in water).
- Understand what's actually shaping AMP8 and the future of the sector.
- Shift from reactive QS to proactive scope lead.
- Decide whether to pivot into utilities or double down and own your patch.

In short: the work's coming, the pay's rising, and the projects are massive. You just need to decide if you're going to watch it happen or get stuck in early.

2. The commercial picture

✓ Outlook for 2026

As mentioned the utilities sector in the UK is about to go through its busiest cycle in decades.

Here's why:

Water, water everywhere (AMP8): from April 2025, water companies are set to pour over £70bn into upgrades. That's more pipes, more treatment plants, more resilience projects and yes, more paperwork. For QS's, it's years of steady work wrapped up in frameworks.

Net Zero isn't just a buzzword anymore: clients are under pressure to prove carbon reductions, which means QS's are costing not just concrete but also kilograms of CO₂. If you've not brushed up on carbon-costing yet, consider this your nudge.

The North West is the place to be: between United Utilities' record £13.7bn plan, National Grid upgrades, and hydrogen/carbon capture projects around Manchester and Liverpool, the region is a magnet for commercial talent. London salaries without the London commute? Not bad eh?

Talent vacuum: solid QS's who can handle NEC4 and alliancing contracts are thinner on the ground than a contractor's contingency line. But don't think it's just about the seasoned QS's, frameworks also need armies of Assistants and Intermediates.

2026 is all about scale. If you've got utilities experience, you'll be in demand. If you've got utilities and digital/ESG expertise, you'll be the unicorn everyone's chasing.



3. What's changing on the ground...

⚙️ Tech You Can't Ignore

Back in the day, being a QS meant drawings, quantities, and a trusty red pen.

Now? You're just as likely to be staring at a dashboard as you are a bill of quants.

Love it or hate it, digital is here to stay, and the QS's who lean in early are already miles ahead.

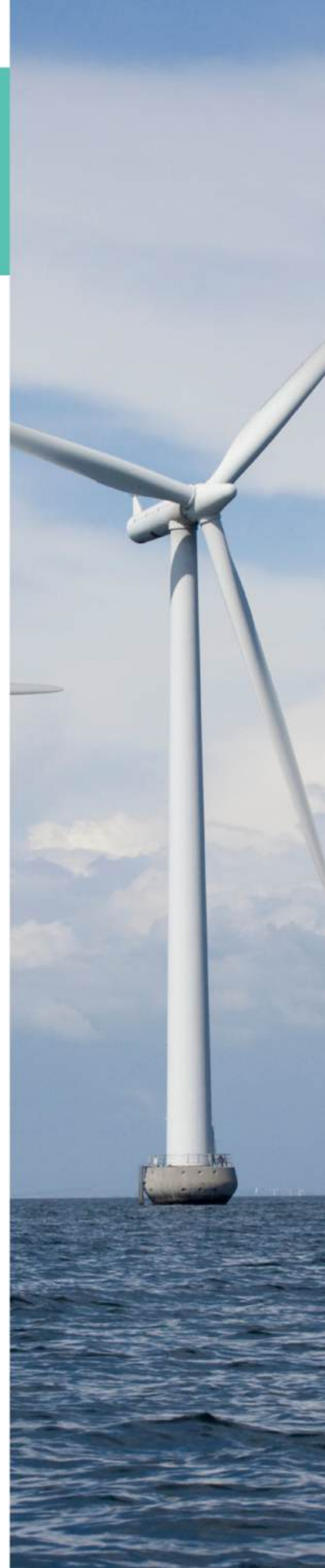
Here's the tech reshaping utilities right now:

- **Digital twins:** real-time replicas of assets that flag cost drift before it hits site.
- **AI & data forecasting:** predicting trends in materials, delays, and even carbon cost before they bite.
- **5D BIM:** integrating time, cost, and data into one live model; no more spreadsheets playing catch-up.
- **Drones:** site measurement, progress tracking, and safety checks at speed.
- **Carbon tools:** turning CO₂ into currency; cost plans now track emissions alongside pounds.
- **Collaboration platforms:** CEMAR, Power BI and others that keep everyone (and every change) visible in real time.

QS's aren't just cost police anymore. You're data interpreters, carbon calculators, and commercial risk analysts.

It's not about replacing what you do, it's about broadening the skill set that keeps you relevant. The shift is simple: clients don't just want numbers; they want narrative and foresight.

The QS's who can turn data into decisions are the ones who'll lead this next utilities cycle.



4. Where is the work?

🚧 Landmark projects & government investment

So where's all this money actually going? It's one thing to talk about "billions of investment." It's another to know which projects will keep QS's busy, and occasionally stressed, through 2026 and beyond.

💧 United Utilities – AMP8

At £13.7 billion, this is the largest capital programme ever approved in UK water. It covers new treatment plants, network resilience upgrades, and smart-metering roll-outs across the region. QS's are already being embedded early into programme offices to manage NEC4 workflows, alliance budgets and risk controls that will stretch to 2030.

⚡ National Grid upgrades

Major power-transmission reinforcements are under way from Crewe to Penwortham and across the North West coast. Expect frameworks covering substations, converter stations and interconnectors; all demanding commercial leads fluent in cost-to-carbon reporting and compensation-event forecasting.

🔋 Hydrogen & carbon capture projects

The HyNet North West cluster is moving from feasibility to delivery, linking hydrogen production, carbon-storage pipelines and low-carbon industrial hubs. It's a new language of contracts, interfaces and KPIs, and it needs QS's who can quantify risk in an emerging market.

🏗️ Government-backed programmes

Central-government investment in net-zero infrastructure, flood resilience and regional growth funds is funnelling billions into utility-scale civils and energy schemes. Procurement is already aligning to local supply-chain capacity, meaning opportunities will multiply for QSs across consultancy and contracting. The North West isn't just another region – it's the UK's utilities playground for the next decade. Clients are prioritising mindset and adaptability over sector history, and the QS's who pivot early will own the pipeline.



5. How to get in (or stay ahead)

Routes in

- **Civils to utilities crossover:** if you've ever priced drainage, ducting, or trenching, congratulations you've already worked on utility scope.
- **Support roles on NEC4 projects:** don't wait to be the lead. Get your hands dirty with early warnings, CE workflows, and contract admin. That's how you get noticed by the people who sign off the scopes.
- **Start with enabling works:** substations, compound set-ups, temporary works all the "boring" stuff that quietly pays the bills. They're your entry ticket into bigger power and water jobs.

Staying sharp

- **Use the tools:** CEMAR isn't just for uploading documents and pretending you're busy it's your visibility engine. Use it properly.
- **Learn the contracts:** NEC isn't just a rulebook it's a language. The QS's who can translate it into cost and risk are the ones clients actually trust.
- **Push for early input:** stick your hand up for design reviews or scope chats. Even if you don't have all the answers, you'll learn faster and people will remember you're the one who shows up.

Mistakes to avoid

- **Waiting to feel confident:** no one ever felt "ready" for utilities. The best way to learn it is to jump in and get supported by the people who've already done it (and survived).
- **Assuming it's too technical:** it's not rocket science it's project delivery with more cables and acronyms. The best QS's simplify; they don't overcomplicate.

You don't need to be an expert to step into utilities you just need to show up, learn fast, and back yourself. Most people talk themselves out of great moves; the smart ones just crack on.



6. The toolkit

Here's what the sharper QS's in utilities are actually mastering; not the theory, the stuff that makes a difference day to day:

CEMAR + NEC4: these aren't "nice to have" anymore, they're the price of entry. You don't need to be the office guru, but you do need to know how the workflows tie into cost exposure.

Carbon cost literacy: carbon is the new currency. You'll need to read embodied carbon data, spot where clients are over-specifying, and explain why a greener option isn't always a cheaper one (yet). Basically, learn to talk carbon without sounding like a sustainability influencer.

Digital twin basics: think of it as 3D data that doesn't just look good; it saves money. If you understand how those models affect scope, maintenance, and lifecycle planning, you're already ahead of the QS's still living in 2D.

Reporting with tools: Power BI, dashboards, data visualisation – yes, even QS's have to make things look pretty now! Learn how your numbers feed those reports that land on boardroom tables. Translation: the better your dashboard looks, the fewer questions you'll get on Friday afternoons.

You don't need another qualification to get ahead in utilities. You need intent and the confidence to operate where the pressure is because that's where the opportunity sits.

Ask these questions:

About the role and team:

- How is the commercial function structured across AMP8 or framework delivery?
- What part of the scope needs more cost-control or visibility?
- How early are QS's involved in design or value engineering discussions?

About delivery and risk:

- How are compensation events and early warnings being managed under NEC4?
- Where are the biggest cost or programme pressures right now?
- How is carbon performance being tracked and reported; is it a KPI yet?

About learning and development:

- Which new skills are proving most valuable in utilities QS roles?
- Are there opportunities to shadow client-side commercial reviews or data reporting?
- How are teams using lessons learned from AMP7 to improve this cycle?

About collaboration and exposure:

- How closely do QS's work with design, engineering and carbon teams?
- What does "success" look like here? Cost accuracy, delivery confidence, or stakeholder trust?
- If I wanted to add the most value in my first six months, where should I focus?



7. What's next?

You don't need a crystal ball to see what's coming; just a bit of awareness.

AMP8 will scale hard:

Big frameworks are shifting from PowerPoints to diggers. Mobilisation is kicking off, and clients are locking in their core commercial teams. If you're not visible now, you'll be invisible later.

Digital platforms will be mandatory:

Clients won't accept your spreadsheet masterpiece before long. Reporting will go through Power BI and similar tools. If you can't speak dashboard, you'll need to learn.

Carbon goes from buzzword to KPI:

The QS's who can factor carbon into cost plans (and explain it without putting everyone to sleep) will be the ones trusted with the big scopes.

Hiring gets defensive:

Expect more counteroffers, more panic promotions, and a few eye-watering salaries thrown around just to stop people leaving. The smart QS's will already be positioned, quietly, and won't need to fight through the noise.

Here's the quiet part no one says out loud: the biggest moves won't happen on job boards. They'll happen in the background through private conversations, quiet referrals, and well-timed introductions.

If you're waiting for the LinkedIn advert, you've already missed it.

8. Salary & role forecast

The utilities boom is creating one of the tightest commercial talent markets we've seen in years. Money, progression and project access are all being reshaped by framework security, carbon metrics, and digital delivery.

Below are the headlines that matter; and where the numbers are heading.

Framework premiums

AMP8 contracts are now paying 10 – 15 % above traditional civils rates to secure continuity. QS's who've delivered under NEC4 or alliancing models are being ring-fenced early with retention bonuses built in. If you've been through an AMP cycle before, expect calls before job adverts.

Digital value

Clients now want visibility, not spreadsheets. QS's fluent in Power BI, CEMAR, and cost-to-carbon reporting are commanding premium day-rates and fast-track promotions. The more you can translate data into board-level clarity, the faster your salary climbs.

Specialist shortage

Hydrogen, carbon capture and clean-energy projects are draining the market of sector-ready QS's. Expect sharp increases across the board, from AQS to Head of Commercial.

Hybrid & retention incentives

Utilities clients can't afford churn mid-framework. Retention bonuses, paid training, and hybrid flexibility are now part of almost every offer. Expect up to £5k annual retention payments or additional leave incentives on five-year frameworks.

Want updated salary data?

Contact us and we'd be happy to give you our latest data and projections. Details are at the end of this guide.

9. Hidden opportunities

If you want to stay ahead, stop waiting for job alerts and start paying attention to where the market, money (and the carbon) is moving.

Carbon-heavy civils:

Highways, infrastructure, and big civils jobs are all getting hit with carbon compliance targets but hardly anyone knows how to cost them. If you can translate “carbon reduction” into “budget impact,” you’ll be everyone’s new best friend.

Private infrastructure:

Data centres, EV rollouts, clean energy hubs they’re all buying utilities scope, and fast. The crossover is messy, the margins are good, and the QS’s who “get” both worlds are rare.

Developer-led services integration:

Developers are finally realising energy management isn’t an afterthought. They’re baking it into design briefs, which means utilities QS’s who understand lifecycle value are suddenly hot property.

Consultancies building infrastructure arms:

Mid-size consultancies are quietly expanding into utilities frameworks. No legacy systems, no red tape just big growth potential and room to make a name for yourself.

Most people wait for these jobs to hit the public eye. The smart QS’s? They’re already having the conversation before the brief’s even written.



Final word

Every QS knows utilities is where the long game is played; steady frameworks, big budgets, real impact. Yet too many still see it as “a bit niche” or “not for me.”

Here’s the truth: utilities is where the next generation of commercial leaders will come from.

The projects are huge, the contracts complex, and the expectations higher than ever. You won’t just be managing cost, you’ll be shaping carbon targets, digital delivery, and long-term resilience for the UK’s infrastructure.

No one ever felt ready to step into it. The people leading frameworks now all started by saying yes before they had it figured out. They learnt the systems, spoke the language, and built careers that now span decades of consistent, valuable work.

If you want stability with purpose, this is it. The pipelines are funded, the investment is locked, and the need for sharp commercial minds is only growing. The question isn’t “is there work?” it’s: “will you be visible when the work lands?”

The next 18 months will decide who shapes AMP8 and who watches from the sidelines. If you’ve read this far, you already know where the momentum is heading.

So take the step.
Ask the question.
Get in the room before the brief is written.

Utilities doesn’t just offer projects, it offers legacy.
Be part of building what keeps the country running.

Join the silent shortlist

Want to be the first in line without being 'on the market'? Join the silent shortlist; our private pool of QS's who get quiet heads-up on the right opportunities. No noise. No job boards. Just the right fit, at the right time.

Explore our latest guides, industry insights and resources [here](#) or contact us directly to discuss your goals and challenges.

A photograph of two call center agents, a woman and a man, wearing headsets and smiling. They are sitting at a desk in a call center environment. The woman is in the foreground, and the man is slightly behind her. They are both wearing dark blue polo shirts with a small logo on the chest. The background is a bright blue wall.

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