

Thames Water scrutiny

This scrutiny was initiated in response to a major water burst in Linden Grove in September 2003 which resulted in large numbers of Southwark residents being without water for up to five days. Overview and Scrutiny Committee members were keen to find out

- a. The cause of the water burst and the impact it had on local people
- b. How Thames Water and the Council responded to the emergency, and what practical lessons could be drawn from it

In the course of the scrutiny, the committee were also made aware of major problems with low water pressure affecting the supply of water to properties on the Denmark Hill and East Dulwich Estates, and agreed to include this in the inquiry. This was brought to the committee's attention by residents who attended Overview and Scrutiny, South Camberwell ward councillors and Camberwell Community Council, who are also pursuing the water pressure issue with the Executive.

The committee held 3 sessions on this topic. The major session was held at Goose Green School, where the committee heard from local residents, from Thames Water officials and Housing Department officers. At its other sessions it heard from Environment and Leisure Department officers who had been involved in the emergency response to the water burst, and again from the Housing Department following up on the water pressure issue.

The water burst

The burst occurred on 12th September when four strategic trunk mains burst consecutively, resulting in a sharp decrease in water pressure and a subsequent loss of water supply to large parts of postal areas SE5, SE15 and SE22. Thames Water estimate that up to 13,000 properties may have experienced problems during the period. Thames Water's response to the water burst was threefold: identifying and repairing the section of mains affected; arranging alternative supplies of water and communicating with customers and the Council.

Repairing the mains

Thames Water representatives explained to Overview and Scrutiny Committee that this had been an unusually complex burst – both in terms of the number of pipes involved and their location. The initial investigation had found two burst pipes, which were repaired, but subsequent excavation found two more. The repair operation was particularly difficult as the section for repair was non-standard and therefore had to be specially made. It was also in a difficult location between two other pipes. One issue that has come to light within both Thames Water and Southwark Council is that there was a failure to communicate effectively on the estimated time it would take to carry out the repair. Staff from Southwark's highways team visited the site and were told by Thames Water engineers that it was a complex job and likely to take three to four days. Meanwhile Thames Water's events centre was telling customers and the Council that water would be restored within six to twelve hours. This must have impacted negatively on both organisations' emergency response arrangements and it was certainly extremely unhelpful to local residents. On the face of it, the council had to accept the information it was receiving formally from Thames Water, but there does not

seem to have been any use made within the Council of the intelligence that had been gathered at the site. Thames Water have acknowledged the communication gap in their arrangements and are seeking to address the issue.

Alternative water supplies

Thames Water had provided a number of static tanks and set up distribution sites for bottled water across the affected areas. Their location was advertised via a recorded message on Thames Water's telephone system. Residents reported that this system was only set up slowly, that the tanks were not replenished so people were left queuing for long periods only to find that the water had run out, there was no information at sites about alternative water distribution points. Although water was successfully delivered to most of the affected areas, there were comments from some people that Thames Water staff were rude and insensitive to residents' desperation to obtain water.

Communication

Thames Water has acknowledged that communication was inadequate and contributed to the poor outcome for customers. It failed in several regards:

- the inaccurate estimate of the time it would take to restore water supply;
- Thames Water's reliance on an overloaded telephone system for dissemination of information;
- a lack of information at water distribution points as to alternative sites.

Committee members also had general concerns as to difficulties in communicating with the Thames Water call centre. Various examples were given of calls that had been placed by members regarding leaks etc in their wards, only to find that no record existed when they tried to follow up. Thames Water officials were confident that records of all calls are kept, and suggested that there might be a problem with accurate identification of the problem area.

Compensation

We heard from tenants that there had been delays in processing compensation claims. The issue is that Thames Water do not hold tenants' details since they are not customers. In the event, Thames Water sent lists of affected properties to the housing department, and housing reconciled them against their own records and supplied the names so that Thames Water could issue cheques. This process is expected to be complete by the end of January.

The Council's role

The Council's primary role in this event was in respect of its environmental health duties. Environment officers attended Overview and Scrutiny Committee to discuss how they reacted to the emergency (and a note of their actions and follow-up work is attached). They felt that their response had been effective but that if they had known how long it would take for water to be restored a larger operation may have been mounted.

The Council also has a general role in ensuring that the emergency response to such a situation is adequate, providing any necessary liaison or assistance. Based on the evidence Overview and Scrutiny Committee received, this appears to have worked well generally, although as described above, there was a failure to act on information received by highways officers from Thames Water engineers working at the site. It is likely that in the midst of the emergency, the individual officers were not aware that they were receiving significantly different accounts of the time it would take to restore water, so we cannot describe this as a failure of process. However, it does suggest that the Council should consider actively debriefing officers who attend emergency situations.

Lessons learned

Thames Water

We have received encouraging signs that Thames Water is actively reviewing its practices in the light of this incident. These are set out in their letter to this committee dated 9th January 2004 and their report to the Ofwat Committee, Water Voice Thames, dated 13th November 2003. We urge Thames Water to prioritise improving communication in the event of water bursts. Suggestions that arose in the course of our discussions included:

- using Thames Water's web site for practical information on live emergencies to assist customers and for other agencies in the locality
- leaflet drops in the affected areas
- putting labels on water tanks with lists of all the water distribution sites

Southwark Council

As stated above, the committee has not received any information suggesting that the council's response was inadequate. However it is worth utilising the water burst incident as a case study, particularly given the new duty on local authorities arising from the Civil Contingency Bill.

A joint emergency response could be agreed in advance with the utility companies, with Southwark proactively planning for such situations. In this case, advanced planning might have resulted in speedier decisions on water distribution arrangements, and the council could have made its own front line staff aware of these arrangements, which may have helped some people to obtain water more quickly.

Low water pressure in Denmark Hill/East Dulwich area

Overview and Scrutiny Committee received representations from residents on the Denmark Hill Estate, from South Camberwell ward councillors and Camberwell Community Council on this question. Residents reported that water pressure had been inadequate for up to three years. It was particularly poor at the peak morning time when people are trying to wash and prepare breakfast before work/school etc. They could never be certain that there would be enough water for baths, showers or even for the toilet to flush. They felt that they were being shuttled backwards and forwards between the Council as their landlord and Thames Water, with no one taking responsibility for moving the situation on.

Councillors Veronica Ward and Peter John submitted a survey they have carried out on this issue in December 2003. This is attached at Appendix 2 and has also been submitted to the Housing Department and Thames Water directly.

At the committee's December meeting, the Divisional Housing Manager reported on the water pressure issue from the landlord's point of view, and explained that the department is looking at installing booster pumps in a number of blocks. However this is an expensive and time consuming exercise so does not represent an immediate solution.

Thames Water's letter of 9th January (Appendix 1) acknowledges the water pressure issue and although it points out that there is not a water pressure management scheme operating in Southwark, they had taken some steps to improve pressure, and are now logging water pressure to the blocks that had been reported as particularly affected. They suggest that an officer is appointed as "champion" to lead on liaison with Thames Water on this issue.

We also note that this topic has been explored in the recent Greater London Assembly scrutiny on water supply in London. The relevant recommendation of that report is as follows :

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that Thames Water, in partnership with Ofwat and the Environment Agency, consult with landlords of tower blocks in London suffering from low water pressures, to evaluate the scale of the problem, and develop and implement a plan to make sure the effects on businesses and residents are minimised. (London's water supply A report by the London Assembly's Public Services Committee October 2003)

At the time of writing, Thames Water has not yet responded to the GLA report.

We therefore recommend that

- Southwark officers proceed with the round table meeting with Thames Water as discussed at December OSC and that this forum should develop a formal agreement between Southwark Council and Thames Water as to responsibility for water pressure. This agreement should be signed off by the Executive for Southwark and at an equivalent level for Thames Water.
- That an analysis of the logging data collected from the newly installed equipment is made available to the ward councillors to assist them in tracking the situation

Conclusion

This scrutiny has been fruitful in that it has generated some learning for Thames Water and Southwark Council on the experience of the water burst, and we hope will lead to some progress on the water pressure issue. It was very useful for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the members of the public who attended to have the opportunity to raise issues directly with Thames Water and we are grateful for Thames Water's participation in our discussions and subsequent follow up action. We also hope that our

discussions made a useful contribution to Thames Water's own review of the water burst.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommend:

1. That Thames Water prioritises the improvement of communication in the event of water bursts, and looks actively at the practical suggestions we have made
2. That Southwark Council reviews its own arrangements, using the water burst as a case study and picking up areas where emergency plans need to be linked across organisations in the borough
3. That Southwark officers proceed with the round table meeting with Thames Water as discussed at December OSC and that this forum should develop a formal agreement between Southwark Council and Thames Water as to responsibility for water pressure. This agreement should be signed off by the Executive for Southwark and at an equivalent level for Thames Water.
4. That an analysis of the logging data collected from the newly installed equipment is made available to the ward councillors to assist them in tracking the situation
5. That Overview and Scrutiny Committee revisits this topic at its May meeting to see what progress has been made and whether it needs to be carried forward into next year's work programme

Learning for scrutiny

This scrutiny was also designed to test an approach to communication. The water burst was a highly topical issue. The scrutiny was advertised via a discussion forum on the council's web site, by flyers in the affected area and a letter in one of the local newspapers. The main meeting was held at Goose Green School, in the affected area, in order to facilitate attendance.

The meeting attracted about 15 members of the public, and we received an additional 8 letters/emails from people who could not attend. Several of them referred to having seen the flyer. The online discussion forum was viewed by about 100 people but had no responses. A discussion forum on firework safety at around the same time also generated no responses, while the poem for Southwark has had 143 responses to date. With hindsight, it may well be that the topic choice was not right for this medium – people who had been affected by the water burst wanted restitution, not a debate. There is also an issue about the pace of scrutiny – it is an exploratory process and takes time to work through the issues. This may be an issue of process - should we conduct a quick fire scrutiny for these types of events? Or an issue of message - do we need to say very clearly to members of the public and other stakeholders from the outset that the process will take 2-5 months?

Appendix 1: Official Response from Thames Water

Chair Overview and Scrutiny Committee
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09 January 2004

Overview and Scrutiny Committee: 10 November 2003 Review of Thames Water's Response to failure of Water Supply in Southwark

Dear Councillor Humphreys

I am writing to respond to questions that were raised at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on the 10 November 2003, that we were unable to give a full reply to at that meeting.

With regard to the alleged rudeness and lack of customer service skills in respect of individuals distributing bottled water on behalf of the company during the failure of supply in September 2003, we have fully reviewed our response to this event.

The widespread nature of this incident did make it extremely difficult to ensure that adequate water was available and that accurate information was given to all customers. We believe that the staff on the ground did their best under difficult circumstances to ensure the equitable distribution of water. However we do acknowledge that there were problems and that some customers were not handled as sympathetically as they should have been. I would like to take this opportunity to apologise on behalf of Thames Water to any customer who does feel that they were unfairly or rudely treated during the failure of water supply last September.

As a result of our review a new senior post has been created, reporting to our Customer Services Director, to ensure that we continue to improve how we respond to customers' needs when problems such as this occur

Following the bursts at Linden Grove we did improve our ability to ensure that timely and sufficient alternative water supplies are available should another event such as this occur. The success of this measure was evident when major bursts occurred at New Malden and Colliers Wood.

In addition I would also like to remind any elderly or disabled customer that we do offer a service for customers with special requirements details of which can be obtained from our Customer Centre on 08459 200800. During the event at Peckham we did give priority to delivering water to the homes of such customers who were registered with us.

Councillor Yates raised an issue of water leakage outside the Consort Public House, SE15. Our initial investigations showed no reported leaks outside the Consort Public House. However officers from Southwark were able to tell us that the address was in

fact outside the Montague Arms, 289 Queens Road. From this we were able to identify a leak in the water main in Queens Road, which has now been repaired.

In order to manage leakage Thames Water has instigated a programme of managing the pressure in the water mains in some areas. However I can confirm that no such programme has been started in any area of the London Borough of Southwark.

However at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting specific problems were raised with the water pressure to some blocks on the Denmark Hill and Dog Kennel Hill estates. Measurements of the pressure in the water mains that supply these estates had in fact been taken in October 2003, which indicated that changes in the water supply network could be improved by the operation of some key valves. We have subsequently carried out this work and improved the water pressure in the area. This improvement has been verified by the use of logging equipment that has shown Thames is supplying well above the statutory minimum. (We are supplying on average 15/16 meters head that is well above the statutory minimum of 10 meters head) We are also now using specific logging equipment at points adjacent to the properties that were identified with Southwark Council Officers, to directly assess the pressure at these properties. When the data from the logging equipment has been collected and studied we will further consult with Southwark Council Officers to agree a course of action.

In addition we have investigated water pressure problems on the Boundary Estate. The cause of this was found to be a valve not fully open on the internal pipework.

It may be helpful for the Committee to know that Thames Water's responsibility for water pipework only goes as far as the boundary of a property. For individual properties this is usually the front boundary. For housing estates this does mean that any pipes within the entire boundary of the estate is the property owners' responsibility.

We do however appreciate that it is frustrating for customers who are tenants to get a resolution to problems and are therefore anxious to work with Southwark on these issues. I would therefore ask through the Committee if a single 'champion' could be appointed from the Council's officers in order to ease liaison between our respective organisations on water supply pressure issues.

I do hope this fully answers the questions outstanding from the meeting on the 10 November 2003. Should you require any further clarification or have additional questions please do not hesitate to come back to me.

We are committed to working closer with all Local Authorities within the area in which we operate and I will be contacting your Chief Executive to arrange ongoing strategic meetings. I am of course willing to attend any further meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Yours sincerely

Tony Denton
Local Government and Community Affairs Manager
Thames Water

Appendix 2: Low water pressure on Dog Kennel Hill and Denmark Hill, South Camberwell (Cllr Ward & Cllr Peter)

Residents of dwellings on the hill suffer years of intermittent water supply. Some residents have had no water in the morning for at least three years.

Councillors in South Camberwell have received many complaints from residents about the problems of low water pressure and often the total lack of water for large parts of the day including the weekends. In order to get a clearer picture of the extent of the problem Cllr. Veronica Ward and Cllr. Peter John have carried out a survey of residents on the three most affected blocks on each hill – a total of 267 dwellings. Before the closing date 45 forms have been returned cataloguing a continuous daily struggle coping without an adequate water supply. **Some residents have made many complaints both to both Thames Water and the Housing office and in the main been told that the other agency is to blame. While this buck passing goes on residents continue to suffer.** Some residents are aware that the Housing Department is looking into the need to install pumps but see no progress and have become disheartened. It is clear that Thames Water and Southwark Housing need to work together on this.

What did residents say in their responses us ?

1. How long has this been going on ?
Many had experienced the problem for about three years, often from the time they moved into the property. One person reported that she had suffered the problem for 10 years. Others have had the problem for a few months and none of the times mentioned were linked with specific blocks. So individual residents have a much worse service than others in the same block. Overall the feedback might indicate that the problem has been getting worse over the last 18 months.
2. How frequently ?
Residents are affected at different time, some during the week and some only at weekends. However consistent feedback is that residents are without water at peak times usually 7.00 – 10.00 in the morning and again early evening. One resident said she only got water at these times on Bank Holidays and Christmas Day.
“5 days a week morning and evening” “usually weekends” “every morning” “mid morning weekends” “8.00am – 2.00pm and sometimes at night..7.pm – 12.00” “Saturdays and Sundays every week”, “every day”, “twice a day”.
3. Hot Water, cold water or both ?
“Bathroom and toilet also hot water supply to kitchen almost every weekend” “mostly hot water and toilet”, The majority experience loss of cold water “You can never be sure when there will be water” “starts off with cold water, tank runs out then hot water also goes” “kitchen and bathroom: no hot water”
4. 17 residents have complained to Thames Water, some almost continuously. “said it was down to Southwark Council” “not their problem”

“usually say not their responsibility” “they will call us back but they never did”
Thames Water are reported as responding egs.: “temporary problem, working on solution” “There is no shortage” , “ go to local housing office” , “nothing to do with them” , “broken pipes” ,

5. 25 residents have complained to the Neighbourhood Housing Office consistently about the situation. The responses have included “down to Thames Water”, “water board’s responsibility”, “its being dealt with” “will cost £50,000 per block” “inform Thames Water”, “burst pipes”

6. What else did residents say about having no water for hours almost every day. Daily life is miserable because of this situation.

“I have made lots of phone calls but noone knew what was going on and kept passing me backwards and forwards”

“As we pay water rates, this should be rectified”

“we need this situation resolved as soon as possible , we never know when we can use a washing machine, bath or toilet and all this in 21st century. Will the water board compensate us for this dreadful inconvenience ?”

“it is such a bad experience ...we have many little children in the house”

I have to fill baths of water overnight to flush the toilet”

“In my flat I have a combi boiler...it takes 25 minutes to run a bath. I have been paying for water but not receiving it. Noone seems to have taken this seriously”

“please please sort something out it does not feel like the western world anymore”

“_I have been flooded twice because of this, the neighbours have left taps on not realising that the water has gone off. My washing machine has been damaged as a result.”

“Please resolve”

“I have bought tons of water which I would otherwise not have bought being on low income and raising three children alone.”

“Having a very sick husband and trying to get my washing done in the machine and having no cold water running to rinse it pretty awful and very frustrating “

“Please please can we have water for Christmas !,... I have family staying and it would be nice to be able to shower , bath and flush the toilet”

“Just get it sorted”

Four respondents reported no problems with the water. But they were not consistently in one part of the block. One was on the top floor of a block badly affected and another was on a ground floor and one in the middle floor. Part of the problem of getting it solved may be the inconsistent service on these two estates.

Councillors Peter John and Veronica Ward 9th December 2003

Appendix 3: Non Supply of Water to SE5, SE15 and SE22 between 12 – 17 September 2003

Information from Environmental Health & Trading Standards Service Manager
[Tim England 25/11/03]

Background

- Approximately 982 food businesses potentially affected to some degree
- TW anticipated full repair by 12th Sept but due to complications and number of bursts, TW unable to provide timescale for repair
- 2 complaints were received from the public in relation to food premises still operating. The complaints concerned 5 premises
- The premises were contacted and water supply determined and advice on hygiene given
- 4 complaints were received in relation to health & safety. 2 were from employees and 2 from employers. Advice was given in all cases.
- Call Centre advised to put calls from public and businesses straight through to EH Officer for advice to be given
- Large food manufacturer contacted to determine their supply and how they were coping
- TW water provided key users with tankers eg Hygrade Foods, Dulwich Hospital (which also has a borehole water supply used for down services) and Kings College Hospital (Lambeth) received an alternative feed
- Full supply re-instated on 17 Sept
- No extra cases of food poisoning/infectious disease determined during and after this period

Findings

All Local Authorities in the UK have been contacted electronically and asked to share best practice in similar situations. There were only 3 responses received. Two of these requested that any information discovered is shared with them.

Due to the nature and minimal responses received, it is clear that there is no national 'plan' of response in such a situation as experienced by LBS in September.

The situation has been specifically raised with the Association of London Environmental Health Managers (ALEHM) with a view to exploring cross-border arrangements in the event of a similar emergency. The association is currently exploring the environmental health role in contingency planning in general, but little thought, thus far, has been given specifically to water outages.

The September water outage was due to a set of exceptional circumstances that are unlikely to be repeated. There has not been any identified public health impact in relation to food safety (see attached) or health and safety in the areas affected. However, the incident has highlighted the need to look at how we would deal with extended water outages in the future and we will be working with ALEHM to discuss mutual aid arrangements.

The actions taken by EH at the time of the water outage e.g. checking on high risk premises, advising clients directly over the phone etc were sufficient at that time.

If there were any future similar incidents, the EH response would be contingent on the nature and scope of the incident.



