

WEDNESDAY 17TH SEPTEMBER 2003

COUNCIL ASSEMBLY
(ORDINARY)

URGENT QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY GROUP LEADERS IN ACCORDANCE
WITH COUNCIL ASSEMBLY PROCEDURE RULE 3.11

1. QUESTION TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL FROM COUNCILLOR IAN WINGFIELD

Why did it appear this Monday that the Council had no emergency contingency plans to deal with the breakdown in the water supply system, and if it did why were they so ineffective?

RESPONSE

What seems to have happened is that first one main burst, then another and the water supply was then cut off to many thousands of residents and also businesses in SE5, SE15 and SE22. The health service was also affected.

The provision of water within the borough is the responsibility of Thames Water and clearly it's their responsibility to ensure that supplies are maintained, so far as is possible. Thames Water maintains contingency plans to provide emergency water supplies; it would be impossible for the Council to duplicate its efforts but the Council maintained close liaison with Thames Water to minimise the effects on the people of Southwark, ensuring that Thames Water was aware of the location of residents who may be vulnerable to enable Thames Water to provide supplies to their doors.

Water supply has been disrupted across various sites - affected residents live in Crown House, Parkside, Pelican, Harris Street, Rosemary Gardens neighbourhoods.

Officers from each neighbourhood have been on call throughout the period of disruption. Neighbourhood Managers were contacted over the weekend. Main concerns have been dealt with via supply of water from bowsers or standpipes situated throughout the area. Out of Hours service was advised of the difficulties and R&M/Heating Contractors were on standby.

On Monday early visits were made to all sheltered housing units to ensure any issues arising from the failed water supply could be dealt with as priority. Repeat visits were made yesterday; there were no concerns relating to these premises.

Visits have also been made to other known vulnerable tenants and links with Tenants and Residents' Associations have proved invaluable in identifying potential high-risk residents. In circumstances where there was a failed

supply and vulnerable residents had been identified the neighbourhood has ensured water was delivered.

The water supply affected Neighbourhood Offices to varying degrees: Crown House staff were dispersed to other offices but a skeleton reception service was maintained in the neighbourhood. Good use was made of the facilities at Kingswood sub office for telephone enquiries and an additional reception service. Other staff were dispersed to Pelican and Parkside and assisted with increased callers into receptions or calls made by telephone.

At Crown House, 2 portaloos were supplied for the use of staff and residents.

Harris St/Rosemary Gardens offices were affected on Monday but now have running water - there was no effect on service provision.

Parkside and Pelican offices were not directly affected.

With regard to Social Services:

- Social work teams, GPs and District Nurses identified any vulnerable people who had not been visited in the last few days. They were contacted initially by telephone and visited if necessary.
- There was also double checking that there were no problems with residential/nursing homes although our current understanding is that these are outside the affected area and there are no problems reported.
- GP surgeries in the area were all operating to some extent. Kings and Dulwich hospitals also continued to function.
- There was liaison with Housing Department to ensure consistency in terms of actions.
- Cathy Jeffrey (Primary Care Team Locality Director for Dulwich) coordinated the joint health and social care response.

The Town Hall and adjoining council offices were without water on Monday and for much of Tuesday. Arrangements were made to provide facilities in council offices opposite the Town Hall which had no interruption to water supplies.

I am not happy that

- a. there were several bursts
- b. it took so long to restore the water supply
- c. that people often had to walk significant distances to obtain water
- d. that little information was provided by Thames Water and
- e. that in many cases people seemed to have no access to fresh water.

I understand that Thames Water is conducting an inquiry and I have written to Thames Water expressing my concern at these events and the inconvenience caused to tens of thousands of people in Southwark. I have asked Thames Water to share the findings of its enquiry with the Council so that we may see what lessons have been learned. I shall also be complaining to the Water Regulator, OFWAT.

SUPPLEMENTAL QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR IAN WINGFIELD

I would like to thank the Leader for his response. I am sure all Southwark's residents will be greatly relieved with it but the image of Councillor Stanton tinkering with the spanner at their waterworks I don't think is an edifying one for the borough. However what he has not done in his response is actually address the point I made in my question. The point of my original question was not to talk about the Council's particular response in this regard, although obviously that was touched on in it. But the general emergency contingency plans which the Council may have for emergencies, not just of a utility nature but other emergencies whether it is of a terrorist nature or other natures which may occur within this borough. What he does not address in his original response is actually a reply to that and similar to the point that Councillor Watson made earlier I would think all of us would be concerned to find out in great detail the workings of our emergency contingency plans and as such I would request him to consider this as an issue for Scrutiny and I hope that he will refer it to Scrutiny.

RESPONSE BY THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

The question is quite specific about asking about emergency contingency plans to deal with the breakdown in the water supply system, which is why my answer deals with emergency contingency plans to deal with the breakdown in the water supply system. Nothing that appeared on Monday can possibly have led anyone to the conclusion that we have no emergency contingency plans for anything. No one knows what the contingency planning for nuclear war is like because there was not one on Monday. I think that there is a valuable lesson to be learned from this. I would certainly support us wanting to have a Scrutiny into this but as Leader of the Council I am afraid it is totally beyond my remit to have anything being dealt with by us it is a matter for the Chair of the relevant Committee.