

REVIEW OF THAMES WATER'S RESPONSE TO FAILURE OF WATER SUPPLY IN SOUTHWARK

This document draws together issues raised and themes emerging from scrutiny sessions on this topic to date as a reminder and starting point for formulation of draft recommendations.

The Project Brief for this review was agreed by OSC on 13th October 2003 and is attached at Appendix A.

Issues emerging included:-

Inquiry

- Thames Water has commissioned a full inquiry into the recent situation and agreed that Members may have sight of its findings.

London's Water Infrastructure

- Victorian infrastructure – concerns in respect of its capability and maintenance needs;
- Pan-London dialogues ongoing in respect of concerns about infrastructure;
- No guarantee can be given that a similar situation will never occur, given age of infrastructure.

Assessment of Resolution Time

- Inaccurate and inconsistent information given by Thames Water [to the authority and residents] in respect of the estimated timescale for resolution [TW estimated 48 hrs, but operational staff estimated 3-4 days] – possible internal communication issue between strategic and operational TW staff;
- TW's initial assessment of a short resolution time prevented Southwark Council from taking more appropriate action earlier in the situation.

Thames Water's Emergency Response

- TW acknowledged its anticipation, recognition and speed of response to future problems required improvement.
- Assessment and review of the emergency matrix was suggested;
- A joint emergency approach should be agreed in advance with utility companies, with Southwark being proactive in planning for such situations.
- Placement of emergency water supplies through the borough - better accessibility and identifiability of static tank sites, full information provision about location of nearest and alternative tanks, use of appropriate sites in borough.
- Bottled water supplies - supervised distribution, staff/contractor customer service training, provision of containers appropriate to customer need.

Mapping of affected areas

- Local knowledge - knowledge of the interrelationship between the company's own water supply zones and above-ground borough areas was inadequate – this directly impacted on TW's response to and recording of problem reports.

- Mapping of individual customer connections to the mains system was not comprehensive, but improving.

Thames Water Call Centre - problem report recording

- Call Centre – customers reported lack of response, problems with staff interpretation/recording of problems, better local knowledge of area needed, and overview of any developing problems in borough suggested.
- Responses depend on priority placed on the problem as reported to Call Centre.

Communication

- Thames Water's communication with local residents/customers not timely, and its communication strategy not consistent;
- TW recognised its responsibility in respect of information dissemination and acknowledged this not effective.
- Whilst TW's press office made use of local radio and national television to disseminate information, its website served only for *promotion* of services and gave no information about the developing situation;
- TW's public contingency plan was not shared with Southwark Council.

The Role of the Council

- NHOs and TW could work more closely together to enable NH Managers to disseminate problem/emergency information to tenants.
- NHOs might also disseminate emergency information to residents via correspondence, siting of notices in public areas, on billboards or at key travel terminuses in the borough.

London-wide Implications

- Significant risk of repeat incidences in the capital but apparently no London-wide strategy.
- Cross borough discussions and officer liaison in respect of London-wide water pressure problems had started informally.

Compensation

- Compensation - domestic customer compensation based on *estimated* supply interruption for 3 or 5 days – there being no means of verification.
- Data Protection Act prevents local authority or registered social landlords passing information on indirectly billed customers to Thames Water, unless the authority or RSLs legally recognises Thames Water as their agent for the purposes of arranging compensation payments.
- Thames Water's guarantee leaflet, particularly its 48hr mains repair guarantee, had not been honoured in a number of respects in particular in respect of TW's promise to ring customers back.
- Reportedly North Park area residents had not received compensation.

Water Pressure Problems

- Residents [Denmark Hill area] reported major water supply problems since well before September 2003, including: intermittent periods of no supply during day and evening; generally unpredictable supply; no warnings given of loss of supply; major inconvenience and depressing effects on resident morale of ongoing supply failures; and lack of resolution or information.

- Statutory minimum water pressure often insufficient to achieve water supply past the third floor of certain blocks in the borough. Southwark has installed pumps at some blocks. Issue of where responsibility for ensuring supply rests [i.e. whether with landlord or water supplier].
- Thames Water agreed to respond in detail about: ongoing water pressure problems in Southwark; reasons for and possible solutions to the problem; and information to address questions arising about pressure management schemes extant.