

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 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 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?

Officer notes