



London Borough of Hackney Living in Hackney Scrutiny Committee: 14 January 2020

Report following burst water main on Queen's Drive, N4
08/10/19

Introduction:

Thames Water Utilities Limited is the UK's largest water and wastewater services company. Every day, we supply around 2,600 million litres of tap water to 10 million customers across London and the Thames Valley, along more than 31,000 km of water pipes from 97 Water Treatment Works.

We also remove and treat more than 4 billion litres of sewage for 15 million customers along 100,000 km of sewage pipes to 351 Sewage Treatment Works.

Thames Water is regulated by the Water Services Regulation Authority (Ofwat). Ofwat is the economic regulator of the water and sewerage industry in England and Wales. Ofwat acts independently from the Government and aims to ensure consumers receive value for money. Ofwat establishes the limit on how much individual water companies can charge their customers and aims to protect the standard of service customers receive from their supplier.

Map of Area Supplied by Thames Water Utilities Limited:



Burst water main on Queen's Drive, N4 on 8 October 2019

Summary of the incident:

A 36inch (in diameter) water main burst in Queen's Drive, N4 2BB, on 8 October 2019. The pipe itself is one of our "trunk mains", a classification given to larger diameter mains in a water distribution system that convey large volumes of water at high pressure from water treatment works to local service reservoirs.

The first call came from one of our customers at 07:55 alerting us to the situation. It is not unusual for a spike in customer contact to be the channel by which we first understand the severity of a burst main. Engineers were at the scene within 30 minutes and initially, supplies to 25,000 properties over a relatively wide area were affected by low water pressure or having no supply at all. Initial attendance primary role is to assess the situation, work with emergency services and identify options to reduce the impact of the burst. Due to the severity of the incident, it was managed as a Level 4 event, our highest category with management responsibility at Director level. In this case the incident response was led by our Operations Director.

The incident was clearly very serious and caused significant distress and disruption to our customers and the local community as well as the wider impact on customers who experienced interruptions with their water supply. We are very sorry this happened and are committed to acting on learning from the incident and supporting our customers and the local community until they are back in their homes. We recognise for some customers, those most severely impacted this will take up to 12months.

177 customer properties were damaged by floodwater, some with minor effects but for others to a much more severe extent meaning a significant number of customers required alternative accommodation immediately. Our loss adjusters worked to support these customers and rehomed those who needed alternative accommodation. Customer representatives identified those on our Priority Service Register (PSR) and ensured they were given priority in terms of assessing and responding to their specific needs. PSR customers are those who have registered with us as having additional or special needs, who are vulnerable and who we can give extra help to if needed in case of supply interruptions.

The interruption to water supplies across the area was reduced over the course of the morning, lasting between three to four hours for most customers. However, the need to fully isolate the burst site resulted in the isolation of approximately 10,000 properties. During the evening we were able to re-direct flows into the area restoring the vast majority of supplies by late evening. Some properties local to the burst site remained out of water until the morning of the 9th when further changes to the network were made to restore supplies. Some airlocks in the system remained, especially around the immediate burst site and specialists were deployed to resolve them.

During the supply interruption two bottled water stations were initially deployed, one at Barnard Court and one at Queen's Drive itself. A further site was later opened at the Emirates Stadium. Bottled water was delivered to all known water dependant customers and contact was made with those customers on our Priority Services Register. During the event 130 pallets of water (130,000 litres) was deployed.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Ofwat, the Environment Agency, the Greater London Authority, London Resilience Forum, Hackney Council, Hackney ward Councillors and the Member of Parliament were all updated and engaged throughout this incident.

The cause of the burst

There is no clear and obvious reason for the pipe failure. The pipe condition is in relatively good condition with minimal erosion of the pipe wall. The analysis did reveal that a repair on a joint at the location of the burst site, potentially up to 50 years old, may have created a weak point with potential traffic loadings over a prolonged period, possibly also contributing. Monitoring on the main observed no abnormalities in the period before the burst itself.

The repair

Repairing the pipe has been a difficult process due to the number of nearby utilities and the extent of the damage to the carriageway as a result of the burst. The main has now been repaired and with the feedback from the independent analysis confirming the general condition is good it will be brought back into service in January 2020. In addition to the main repair, we have also undertaken surveys on the three trunk mains within this pipe track. This identified nine minor leaks. The minor leaks are all on joints and in effect considered as “seeping” and not unusual for a cast iron network. Even so we have repaired six of these leaks and will complete the remaining three shortly. The main will be returned to service when these leaks have been repaired.

Operational event learnings:

Following review and feedback, it was clear the communication between Thames Water and Hackney Council’s Emergency Planning department could be improved. As part of our incident learning we have identified that we could have engaged Hackney officers to support in providing assistance in identifying suitable bottled water stations, helping to prioritise vulnerable customers and coordinating our activity in the field more closely.

In order to understand the extent of the impact there was a reliance on telemetry on our network and customer contact information. Unfortunately, this resulted in a large number of customers being affected that we were unaware of. Moving forward, we will be implementing more “on the ground” manual checks such as static pressure monitoring to assist in identification and scale of customer impact on a more accurate basis.

Our customers were unsure who on site could help with their individual issues and our customer teams, while present, could not be clearly identified from our technical and fix resources.

It is recognised that there was an early need to increase the level of 1-2-1 care for those customers affected to include personal case managers and increased loss adjuster support not just in the immediate aftermath of the incident but also in the subsequent days, weeks and months following. Early identification of an individual’s personal circumstances is key to tailoring the response and level of support to ensure we minimise emotional distress and offer appropriate and easily accessible support to manage day to day practicalities. Our customers experience of this support was not consistent and so we took after following the

incident to put extra support in place with dedicated ongoing support and presence at the local community centre and increased the frequency of our communication to customers via a residents' newsletter.

We have identified a need to continue to improve on the level of stakeholder and customer communications during such a large incident to ensure we provide critical and timely updates during and post incident. Since the incident we have upgraded our website, specifically the homepage which has now gone live with a dedicated new incident management page.

Communications

Our social media channels, website and local media outlets were all updated throughout the event. Ward Councillors and the local Members of Parliament were kept updated. Our Incident Response Vehicle, along with customer representatives and loss adjusters, were on site throughout the week to update and support customers.

Our call centre staff were briefed on the incident, so they were able to support customers contacting us with the latest information. We also made direct contact with PSR to alert them to the situation and to make arrangements for bottled water to be delivered if required.

During the burst event, 130 Priority Service Register customers were affected by having no water. Once the burst was fixed, these customers were called to check everything was back to normal. This includes 19 water dependant customers, to whom we delivered bottled water.

Looking after residents

Since the start of the event, dedicated Customer Representatives have been on site, and continue to support customers affected with any questions or concerns and to coordinate any further support they may require.

On 15 November 2019, we closed our mobile Incident Response Vehicle on Queen's Drive and moved into the Azalea Court Community Centre in Finsbury Park Place, so residents had a designated and comfortable environment to speak to a Customer Representative or Loss Adjuster.

We have continued to make sure our website has been updated since the day of the burst and a dedicated community page has been set up for residents to find up to date information. Four newsletters have been delivered to residents and our Customer Representatives have also maintained local door-knocking to give face-to-face updates on progress of ongoing repair works.

Close communication with local community representatives has also enabled us to better understand some individuals' issues and to identify customers who may need extra help.

In order to raise and manage any follow-up actions our health and safety representative regularly walked around the affected area to make sure rubbish was removed, any broken covers were dealt with and new leaks were reported to be fixed.

193 customers have been allocated with a dedicated case manager, and 31 vulnerable customers are being actively monitored and contacted to see if they need further help.

One of our Customer Representatives has also assisted by acting as a translator for the Turkish community.

Loss Adjusters, with support from Thames Water personnel, have remained on site since the burst (with the exception of the Christmas period) when our current facility, Azalea Court, rented from Hackney Council, was closed.

We have provided support to residents in terms of accommodation, information on drying timescales, assistance with transport, moving and various generic queries. In addition, the adjusters and claims handlers have assisted customers in applying valuations for items on the beyond economic repair lists provided by the drying contractors. These are items which have been removed from the property with the householder's permission. We have had four to five adjusters and claims handlers on site with further claims handlers support available remotely.

To help improve security to vacant properties during the restoration process we have deployed security guards and have since increased their patrols in the area. Bills for customers have also been put on hold and a fund for individuals with needs to buy small goods/fund taxis, or to cover the cost of attending appointments has been set-up.

In order to maintain the focus on supporting our customers we have retained a Gold Command structure chaired by our Customer Experience Director which meets on a weekly basis to ensure focus throughout our organisation remains on returning people to their properties as quickly as possible.

Property damage and alternative accommodation

Sedgwick, our loss adjuster partner arrived in Queen's Drive at 09:56 and remained on site all day and till almost midnight.

Once the water had stopped and the scale of the damage fully realised, two drying contractors were appointed, Disastercare and Polygon. Both were on site starting work early on 9 October. Each contractor was given their own designated area to manage along with Floodcall. Further personnel were brought to site as they became available and arrangements made to rent further drying machines which were then delivered to site and utilised by the drying contractors as and when needed.

Aspect were engaged immediately by Sedgwick. Aspect are roofing, plumbing and electrical contractors and can engage gas engineers as required. They also provide project management services where needed and are thus being used on many Council properties to provide a bespoke service. They were used immediately to arrange electricity supplies working closely with UK Power Networks to keep power on for drying and lighting, for clearing wet properties.

In addition, we had support from a tanking/flooding expert who has supported the drying of a number of properties on Queen's Drive that had specialist equipment installed.

Harwell restoration specialists were instructed on 9 October for issues where important business documents were required to be preserved, and furthermore from a family who had

suffered damage to most of their precious family photographs and other valuables. All are undergoing restoration at Harwell's premises in Oxford.

Initially our accommodation sourcing partner ICAB were tasked with finding hotels for all residents who couldn't remain in their properties. However, as the numbers grew, a second agency, A3, were engaged to obtain hotel rooms to enable us to get as many residents as possible into hotels.

Many families are staying with friends or have accommodation arranged via their own insurer, or, arranged directly via an agency which our insurer is paying for. Others have opted to stay in their own home in undamaged areas or on a floor above the water damage.

We are working closely with Hackney's housing department to repair council-administered properties and the leasehold properties where the buildings insurance is arranged by Hackney Council. This is proving to be challenging and is taking longer than we first envisaged due to issues regarding asbestos flooring. We may again need to move some council tenants if their medium-term accommodation cannot be further extended.

Of those properties where we have control of the drying process around 35% are now dry. Subject to the extent of the work requiring completion, the vast majority of those properties should be reinstated and back to normal occupation by the 6-month mark.

Most of the work is being carried out by independent contractors procured by the homeowners themselves. As such we do not retain control of the process although we continue to work closely with the affected claimants to ensure that work progresses, and that we can get them back into their property as soon as reasonably practicable.

Those taking up to 12 months will include the most severely damaged properties, especially those basement properties close to the site of the burst. We envisage that around 30 properties may take around a year to repair and for the residents to move back in. The rest will fall between 6 and 12 months. We will do all we can to assist in this process and support the affected residents.

For those claims being managed by customers own Insurers we cannot provide timescales.

Compensation

Given the scale and severity of this incident and the impact on our customers, we took the decision to revise our Goodwill Payments / Discretionary Compensation Policy and have significantly increased our payments to customers affected by this event.

For those customers who experienced moderate flood damage, but remain in their property, we have made a payment of £300 per property. However, for those homes which suffered major flood damage, where a resident has been rehoused in temporary accommodation, we have made a payment of £5,000 per property. These amounts are significantly over and above the minimum our regulator would require because we recognise the impact on our customers. These amounts are also completely independent of and in addition to insurance claims for putting homes right and arrangements for alternative accommodation. This discretionary payment was simply our way of trying to say sorry and ensure those customers most in need had some reassurance.

We have attempted to assess each customer's situation on a case by case basis. As a result, some residents only received the £300 initially as they stayed in their homes but on investigation, we decided that they should have moved out due to the severity of damage and increased their payment to £5,000.

Some customers have expressed dissatisfaction with regard to the amount itself, the fact that the discretionary payment was per household and the method of payment being cheque. Whilst we acknowledge this feedback and will use it to inform our approach going forward our intention was to issue the payment as quickly and efficiently as possible to make sure customers had some financial support during a very distressing period.

A discretionary payment of £3,000 was paid to Parkwood Primary School in recognition of distress and inconvenience as they were unable to fully utilise their playground, and £1,000 was given to Hackney Council for community events and a children's Christmas party. We also delivered toys, games, colouring equipment and refreshments to two community centres during October half-term.

Working with Hackney – Incident Management

Although we acknowledge that closer working during the event itself would have been beneficial, we have had a close and effective working with Hackney Council since the operational aspect of the event ended.

Our representatives have attended weekly and then bi-weekly meetings with Hackney officers to maintain close and efficient working. Some initial concerns with regard to sharing customer data due to our interpretation of General Data Protection Regulation guidance have been overcome, and we are now reviewing our incident management arrangements, with a view to having new processes in place from March 2020. This will include aspects relating to information sharing under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 guidance around providing appropriate information in the public's interest.

In January 2020 we have a session booked with Hackney and Islington Council's to understand how they operate their respective 'Gold Command' structure in an incident and what triggers they have in place to support incident management, which will help us to align our ways of working to meet their expectations and needs.

In February 2020 officers from Hackney Council will be visiting us at our Operations Control Centre in Kemble Court, Reading. Officers will be shown our tools and processes to better understand the data and information we have available to us to support us in identifying and managing incidents through to resolution. To further support this, in this session we'll be taking them through our new strategy document so they can see the proactive work we're doing to bridge our gaps and work more effectively with external stakeholders.

These meetings were discussed with Councillor Caroline Selman and Aled Richards on 28 October and we have been working with their team to get these promises delivered in an agreed timeframe.

We have also sent a weekly view of the shift rota for our day and night shift Duty Managers to the Emergency Planning department at Hackney to provide named contacts should an incident occur.

This year we will begin recruitment for dedicated Emergency Planners who will provide that direct link and point of contact throughout incidents, and this will also provide us with an opportunity to work more proactively to prepare and plan for such incidents alongside the councils and Local Resilience Forums.

ENDS