

Research into incident response

Spring/Summer 2023 Thames Water Camberley Odour Incident

Report for Ofwat/CCW – January 2024

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Background, objectives and method



Blue Marble was commissioned by Ofwat and CCW to conduct research with household customers to understand their experiences when incidents take place. The research is primarily focused on water or wastewater-related incidents that affect people in their homes or gardens or going about their daily lives. The programme will generate findings which:

- 1 Help to better establish what customers' expectations of companies are when incidents occur and how well these expectations are met
- 2 Can be used by Ofwat and CCW to improve companies' responses and management of incidents and people's experiences when they take place
- 3 Support Ofwat's wider regulatory work and inform CCW's wider work

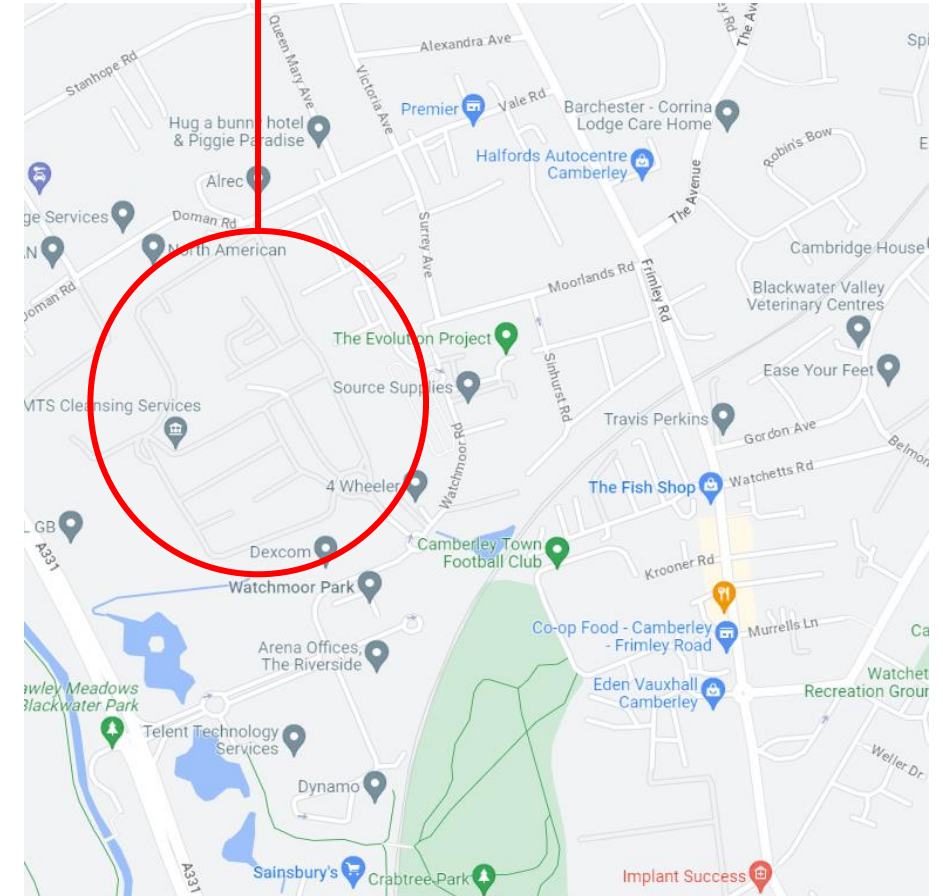
This report is the third within that programme of work. More information on the project is available at:
<https://www.ofwat.gov.uk/customer-insights-when-things-go-wrong/> and
[Blog: Understanding and learning from customers' experiences - CCW](#)



In February 2023, raw sewage sludge was imported to Thames Water's sewage treatment works in Camberley. The sewage was on site until September 2023.

- In May 2023 residents in Camberley started to notice odours in the area. The smells became stronger over time with residents contacting Thames Water, local councillors and their local MP to complain.
- Those affected were in the areas surrounding the treatment works.
- Thousands of residents were affected, but due to the nature of the incident, it is difficult to quantify exactly how many.
- In July and August numerous site visits were carried out by Environment Agency officers, Surrey Heath Borough councillors and the local MP.
- Local politicians played a pivotal role in sharing information and updates with residents and communicating with Thames Water to find out more information on the status of the incident.
- Thames Water sent a letter in mid-August to 5,500 addresses to explain the cause of the odour, apologise and provide an estimated timeline for resolution.
- The tanks containing the sewage were emptied and the sewage taken away over August and the cleaning of the tanks was completed by late September.

Treatment works



The objectives for this specific project (the third in the programme) are as follows:

1

Understand the views, experiences and expectations of affected households in the region during the incident, including views on Thames Water's communication, its speed of response, compensation and overall resolution.

2

Determine any potential differences in the expectations and experiences of different customer groups affected by the incident.

3

Identify which parts of Thames Water's response worked well and what could be improved.



Method overview

We conducted qualitative research with 30 people who were affected by the odour in Camberley to understand their experiences. Fieldwork was conducted both online and face-to-face.

Recruitment methods

- On the ground: e.g. door to door leafleting based on postcodes provided by Thames Water
- Social media: promoting the research via local Facebook groups
- Snowballing through recruited participants
- Contact details of constituents passed on from local MP

Pre-task exercise

All were asked to complete 3 questions about their experiences of the incident. Participants were given the option to respond via video message, online survey or assisted telephone call.

**4 x 60-90min focus groups
(19 respondents total across the 3 categories below)**

**10 x 5-10 min on-street
interviews in Camberley**

1

Those who are primarily home-based

2

Those who primarily work away from home (non-home based)

3

Vulnerable households

Range of local residents including 4 x vulnerable households

Fieldwork dates: 26th October – 9th November

Those we spoke to were customers of South East Water for water supply services and Thames Water for wastewater services.

Sample specification structured to provide a range of experiences / perspectives:

- Demographic mix: socio economic grade; life stage; gender; ethnicity; range of vulnerabilities (health & economic)
- Billing status – including some who were not billed directly (e.g. water supply in landlord's name)
- PSR – including some who were on or had characteristics to be on Priority Services Register



Summary of findings



Key findings

1

The incident had a big impact on residents living in the areas surrounding the treatment works, both physically and mentally. Many struggled to go about their daily lives as normal during the incident and were left feeling that they had 'lost' their summer. There is no respite from an odour incident - with very little people can do to avoid the odour as it consumes an entire area, both indoors and outdoors.

2

Participants did not feel reassured that Thames Water was taking the problem seriously and that actions were being put in place to address the problem. Participants also sought reassurance that the odour was not harmful: some worried that the air pollution would affect them physically which left them feeling anxious.

3

There was no communication at the start of the incident (when the odour became more noticeable in May/June) which led to speculation from participants. Some went to the extent of suspecting their own drainage systems and having engineers investigate (for some, at their own expense).

4

Participants felt that Thames Water only acted due to pressure from councillors and high-profile local MP, rather than of its own accord.

5

Participants received one direct communication from Thames Water, which they felt came far too late in the incident (mid-August). They would have expected to receive communications throughout the incident, providing updates on actions taken and progress.

6

Overall, participants were disappointed in how Thames Water dealt with the incident. From the start, participants felt Thames Water were not taking accountability for the issue and were trying to hide what was going on. Participants expected to receive a communication once the issue was resolved, with an apology and reassurance that this would not happen again; however, they did not receive this.



Participant experiences of the incident



There was significant confusion about the cause of the odour when participants first noticed it (May onwards)

- Prior to this incident, **most were unaware of the treatment works**; those aware lived very close and only experienced sporadic and mild odour prior to the incident - nothing comparable to the odour experienced during this incident.
- Most participants first **noticed a persistent foul odour in May/June**, with a minority (living further away) noticing in June/July.



Someone else's problem

- Some thought it was related to actions of others e.g. neighbours spreading manure in their garden or farms or sewage dumping in nearby farms.

My problem

- Some participants assumed it was their problem and were keen to fix the issue. They called Thames Water before realising the odour extended beyond their houses. This proactive response was most common among those with previous experiences of sewerage issues.

Participants realised the odour was more widespread when:

- The smell worsened over time, and by June it was extreme enough to cause most residents to realise that it was a wider issue.
- Facebook groups were key in keeping up to date. Information from councillors posting on local Facebook groups, messaging councillors directly and word of mouth included:
 - Learning that the treatment works were there.
 - That the sewage was being stored in tanks.
 - That Thames Water had accepted sewage from another area for treatment. Some speculated this was part of a money-making scheme and felt extremely frustrated. Others viewed it as indicative of mismanagement by Thames Water, and felt they were paying for an inadequate service.

"At first, I thought that our neighbour, who is a keen gardener, was spreading organic manure."
Vulnerable

"I had a sewerage problem at my home and so I didn't realise at first that it was something to do with Thames Water."
Vulnerable



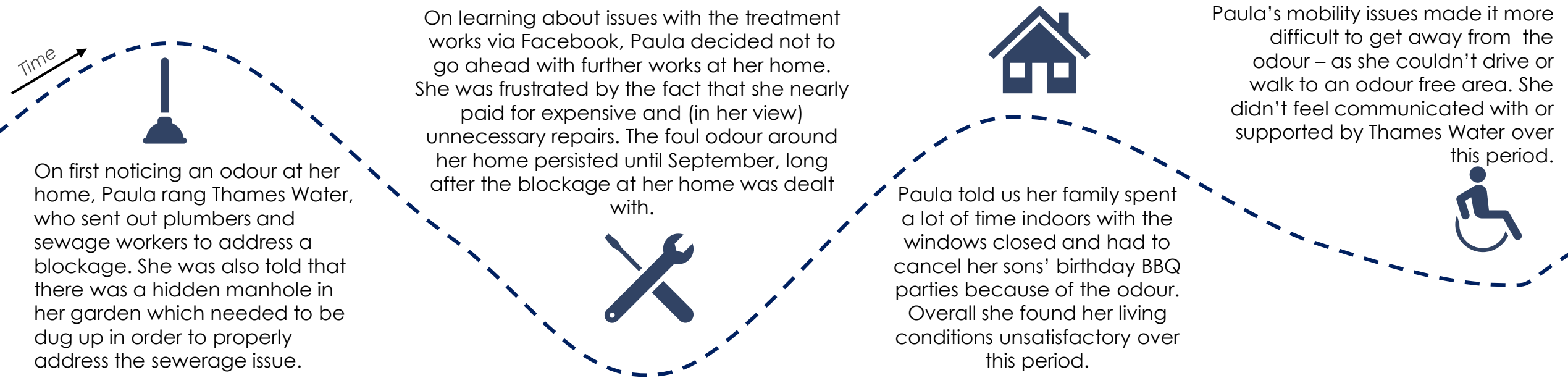
Participants agreed that the odour was extremely strong, fluctuating in strength with little break from the smell, which made it hard to manage.



Case study: experiences of calling out Thames Water engineers and mobility issues limiting ability to cope

Paula lives with her sons and spent most of her time at home during the odour incident, as she was recovering from an operation.

SEVERITY: HIGH Paula was inconvenienced by engineer visits and repairs due to a lack of knowledge about the cause of the odour, which her low mobility made it harder to cope with.



"I did have visitors and they thought it was my house, I felt really embarrassed, and because I wasn't informed, I got plumbers out."

"I hadn't realised there was a problem until I saw it on a group that I belong to on Facebook...[Thames Water's advice was] completely wrong. It was a real worry for a couple of weeks about how much [repairs were] going to cost me."

"I had a hip operation at the end of May, so I was really looking forward to getting some sunshine, but I couldn't really go out or walk very far or drive somewhere."



Participants reported that the odour had direct and indirect impacts on their physical health

Direct impact (often for those living closest to the treatment works)

As a result of the strength of the smell, some experienced:

- Nausea
- Feeling ill generally
- Gagging
- Headaches

A small number of participants (commonly living close to the treatment works and/or with pre-existing health issues) were concerned that the smell indicated the presence of airborne pathogens.

- Sought reassurance directly from Thames Water about the source of the odour, and any potential health impacts.
- One person was still concerned and wondered if GPs had received any reports of illness related to the odour.

"You can't eat with that smell, because it makes you feel sick."

Vulnerable

"At one point it made us all feel ill and gave us a headache."

Home-based

"Affected the whole of the summer, not just mentally but also physically in terms of feeling quite nauseous on occasion, and I was also concerned that this was something in the air."

Vulnerable

Indirect impact (widespread)

Participants felt that methods of coping with the smell were not healthy and could increase vulnerability to illness. E.g.:

- Exercising outside less.
- Going out for fresh air or walks less to avoid the smell.
- Spending less time outside e.g. eating, relaxing, gardening.
- Keeping doors and windows closed – poor circulation of fresh air throughout the house.

"For me, because I work from home so much, I like to go on a walk at least once a day but I just hated the smell."

Vulnerable

"Not a lot of gardening this year, because of the issues."

Vulnerable

"Was anybody taking any measurements of the air in terms of airborne pathogens, I don't think so."

Vulnerable



Negative mental health impacts were widespread, including feelings of anxiety, embarrassment and isolation

Anxiety

Key sources of worry identified link to feelings of being **trapped, disempowered and uninformed:**

- Felt uninformed about the cause of the odour, and actions being taken to address it.
- Didn't feel knowledgeable or in control about when the odour will end.
- Unable to get away from the odour (even at home with windows closed).
- Concerned about potential physical health impacts.

Embarrassment and isolation

Participants felt embarrassed that friends or relatives might think:

- The odour was linked to a plumbing issue or poor hygiene at home.
- Their constant complaints about the smell would dampen the mood in social situations.

Subsequently participants avoided seeing friends/family at home or discussing the odour with unaffected people.

- This was especially isolating for people with limited mobility or small social/support circles.

Impact on mood

Participants were frustrated and low throughout the incident due to:

- The extended length of the incident.
- The lack of communication from Thames Water.
- For some, not knowing why the odour had happened.

They said the odour constantly occupied their thoughts, with low mood negatively impacting relationships e.g. noticing more family arguments.

Effective and timely communication from Thames Water could have allayed many of the sources of these negative feelings

"Your home should be your safe place, and it wasn't. Even with the windows closed I could still smell it inside." *Vulnerable*

"You kind of go a bit insular because you don't want to share your misery with other people." *Vulnerable*

"It just puts you in a foul mood as soon as you smell it." *Vulnerable*



Mental health impacts were felt to be especially severe for some due to similarities with negative experiences during Covid-19 lockdowns; those with pre-existing vulnerabilities were especially affected

Similarities to Covid identified by participants

- Feeling “trapped” at home to avoid an external threat (which some also viewed as a health risk).
- A few were wearing masks to cope with the odour.
- Reducing footfall to local businesses – sense that the whole community was impacted.

A few (especially those with mental health conditions) found this reminder of a difficult time traumatic

Participants told us they felt more angered by their experiences this summer than they did during Covid, due to a sense that Thames Water was ‘to blame’ for causing the odour

“Covid, it had to happen...we all got on with it and did whatever we needed to do... part of me really wants Thames Water to pay and feel the pain that they have caused to us.”

Not home-based

“It felt like another lockdown. It makes you feel like you're going a bit mad, because you're wittering on about it all the time, I bored myself about it in the summer, I was so obsessed with it.” *Vulnerable*

Impact of vulnerability

- The odour made it harder to cope for those with pre-existing mental health conditions e.g. disrupting routines, limiting time spent outside in the garden or on walks.
- Two participants had autistic children who were hypersensitive to smell, and subsequently especially distressed by the odour incident.
- Some with young children were concerned about negative health impacts of poor ventilation on them.

“I had a really bad period of anxiety this summer. Going for walks usually really helps me, and so it really did affect me mentally, really, really badly.” *Vulnerable*

“Both of my children are autistic...they just spent six weeks in the house, because every time they walked outside, they were just hit with this smell and they couldn't handle it.” *Vulnerable*



Participants used a range of techniques to cope with the odour, all of which felt inconvenient in some respects



Batten down the hatches

- Stayed inside with doors and windows closed.
- Avoided using the garden e.g. for meals, relaxing, entertaining.
- Avoided going for walks, or to pubs with gardens nearby – as the smell was still present.

Impact: participants felt disappointed by what they viewed as an uneventful, depressing and uncomfortable summer, caused by reduced leisure activities and heat and stuffiness in their homes.

“I couldn't open the windows when it was boiling hot...and it was a really hot summer, so that wasn't very pleasant.”
Not home-based



Bolt

- Went to work early/spending more time in the office.
- Spent weekends away.
- Went to the gym more.
- Visiting unaffected family/friends.
- Drove to further away open spaces for leisure purposes.

Impact: leaving the house provided temporary relief from the odour, but cost time and money – and was not a strategy available to all.

“Any excuse to leave the house.”
Vulnerable



Buy

- Bought products to cover up smell and/or keep cool with windows closed: candles, incense, air freshener, air purifier, fan.
- Tumble drying clothes to avoid hanging them outside (where they were affected by the odour) – this raised energy costs.

Impact: whilst masking mechanisms helped, they did not get rid of the smell. Increased costs from energy usage and buying products to cope.

“We've bought so many more fans this summer because it was so hot ..., and there was no relief being able to open the windows, and, you know, get a nice through breeze.”
Vulnerable



Financial and health vulnerability affected participants' ability to engage with these coping strategies, and decreased their efficacy



Batten down the hatches

- Stayed indoors prevented the use of some outdoor coping techniques for people with poor mental health.
- Families with neurodivergent children hypersensitive to smell remarked that closing the doors and windows wasn't enough to improve their experiences of the odour.
- One asthmatic respondent usually keeps her windows open to manage her condition - she was unable to do this during the odour incident.

"Not that we had the best summer, but even on the days we did get some sun it would have been nice to sit in your garden, without it stinking like a toilet."

Not home-based



Bolt

- Leaving the house was more difficult and expensive for those without an office to go to:
 - Retired people
 - Stay at home parents
 - Those that work from home
- The socially isolated may struggle to seek respite at the houses of unaffected friends or family.
- Some lacked the mobility to go elsewhere to cope.

"I'm a very serious asthmatic, I get hospitalised with it and having the windows open is obviously recommended, it's just so much easier to breathe. But we had to have all the windows shut all of the time."

Vulnerable



Buy

- Financially vulnerable respondents discussed the stress of additional costs during the incident (although this was only top of mind for a few).

"Running the tumble dryer over putting stuff out on the line, as well as running an air freshening unit in the bedroom. All of this costs money. It was on my mind at the time."

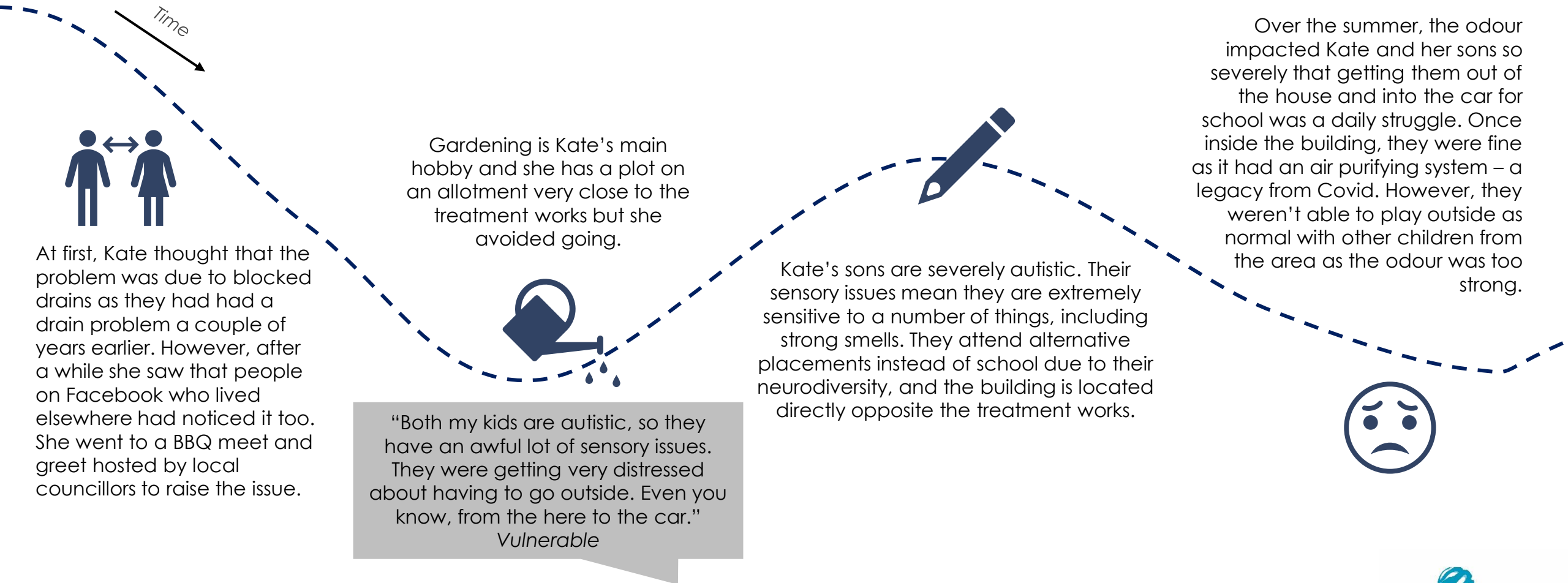
Not home-based



Case study: mum with kids who have sensory issues who really struggled with the impact.

Kate* lives close to the treatment works with her husband and 2 kids. Her children are both autistic and have severe sensory issues which meant they struggled to cope with the odour.

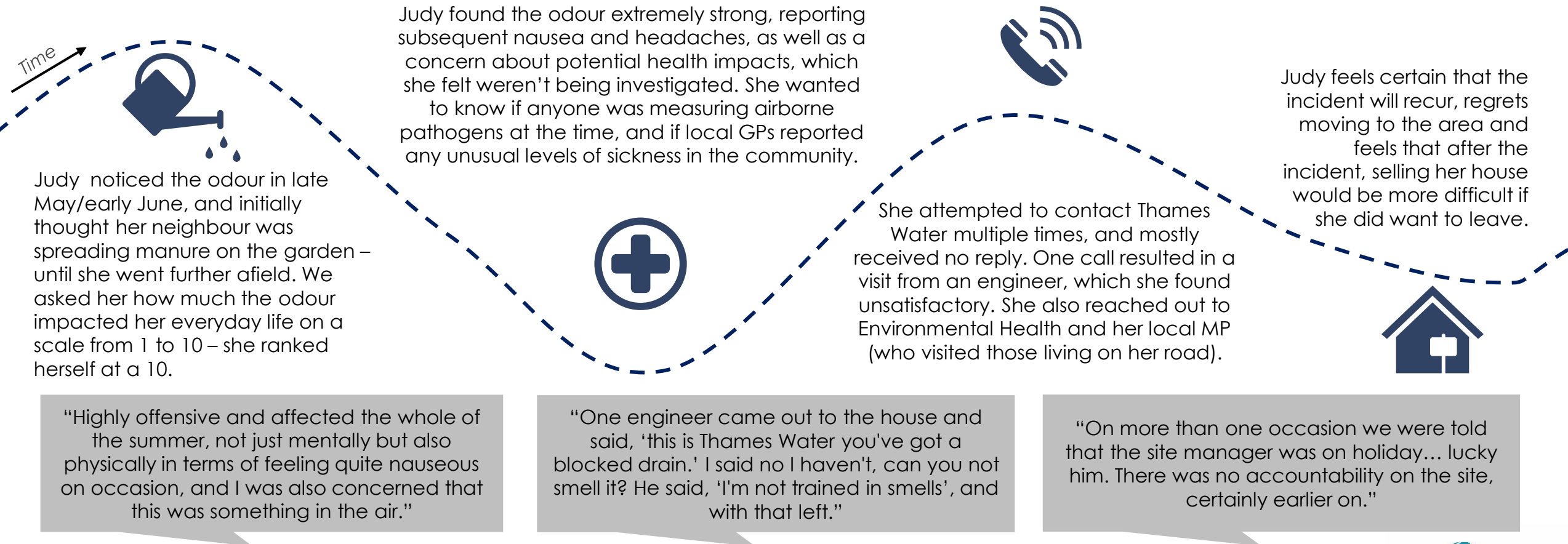
SEVERITY: HIGH The odour affected Kate and her children to an extent that it was a daily struggle for them to go on with their lives as normal.



Case study: retiree who felt the incident impacted her physical health and made official complaints to Thames Water

Judy* is recently retired and lives with her youngest son, very close to the treatment works – they moved in under a year ago.

SEVERITY: HIGH As Judy lived so close she found the smell incredibly strong and difficult to deal with – her mental distress was exacerbated by the difficulty of contacting Thames Water



Communications



BLUE MARBLE

Thames Water did not communicate with participants until near the end of the incident; this meant informal networks were the primary source of information

Local councillors played a significant role in sharing information on the incident and providing updates

- Posts from councillors on local Facebook pages (e.g. Watchetts group) and on councillors' websites were the key information source for most participants.
- Participants praised local councillors for being actively involved in investigating the incident by communicating with Thames Water and posting updates on their responses.
- Councillors also provided photos, including those of the sewage storage tanks and the odour suppression system.
- Facebook pages/groups also allowed participants to discuss their feelings and share their experiences via posts and comments.
- Those who were less engaged with social media felt out of touch as they relied on word of mouth from others in the community to provide updates.

However, informal communications weren't necessarily the preferred information source

- Participants reported that councillors were approachable, trustworthy and were working hard to do right by the community.
- But the information/updates councillors provided on what was happening on the Thames Water site were not 'official', and therefore open to interpretation.

A few looked on the Thames Water website for any information or updates but didn't find anything

"The council was pushing for them to let residents know. If they hadn't, I don't think we'd have got a letter."

Vulnerable

"I think particularly as things were getting more active on social media, that's where all the updates and information was coming from, there was nothing from [Thames], that was the most disappointing thing."

Vulnerable

Participants would have preferred to learn about activities and updates on the treatment works directly from Thames Water



The only direct communication from Thames Water was a letter in mid-August (5-6 months after the sludge was moved to the Camberley site)



Timing

- The incident had been ongoing for months before any direct communication was received from Thames Water.
- Participants had strong feelings of disappointment and frustration that it had taken this long to hear from Thames Water (would have expected something in June).
- Key information regarding what had caused the odour, what was (and wasn't) being done and ongoing updates had already been received from other sources (councillors, Facebook).



Motivation

- Participants questioned why Thames Water had taken so long to reach out – some felt they simply did not care, and others felt they were trying to hide their actions.
- Participants speculated that Thames Water only eventually wrote to residents due to continuous pressure from local councillors and involvement from a high-profile MP (Michael Gove).

“It feels like they've purposely timed the letter so they know it doesn't matter how much we complain, it was on its way to be sorted anyway.”
Home-based



Reach

- Some questioned how Thames Water decided who would receive the letter and doubted that all affected were reached.
- Those who did not receive the letter, but were affected, felt especially aggrieved as they felt their negative experiences were not being acknowledged by Thames Water.

“I think the only reason anything happened was that the councillors got involved.”
Vulnerable

Overall, the impact of the letter was that participants felt ignored and confused. They also felt Thames Water had acted suspiciously and did not care about the impact the incident had on participants.



When reviewed in detail during fieldwork, participants felt that the letter sent by Thames Water was misleading and lacking sufficient information and/or explanation

16 August 2023

Odour from Thames Water site on Riverside Way

Dear Neighbour

You may have experienced abnormal levels of odour from our wastewater treatment works on Riverside Way recently. We are sorry for this and would like to explain why this is happening, what we are doing about it and to reassure you that the situation is a temporary one.

Why has the odour been more noticeable recently?

Some level of odour from wastewater is unavoidable and although we take all possible steps to minimise odours from the site, it may still be noticeable at times.

However due to a recent unplanned situation, we have had to take in extra sewage sludge from other Thames Water sites and process it at Camberley. Due to the unplanned nature of the operation, we have not been able to fully control the odour from it. This is why the odour may have been more noticeable recently. We did not take the decision lightly to take in the extra sludge and we will be ensuring that we minimise the likelihood of having do this again in the future.

What are we doing about the odour?

We are operating a 24-hour odour suppression system, to mask the odour as much as we can. We are also processing the extra sludge as quickly as we can, so that it can be removed from the site. Once the extra sludge is removed and the storage tanks cleaned, odour levels will return to normal. We currently anticipate this to be completed by the end of August.

How to find out more

If you wish to find out more information about this issue, please contact us on 0800 316 9800, quoting reference 00409576. If you want to report odour to us, either ring us on that number or, you can report a problem online at: <https://www.thameswater.co.uk/contact-us/report-a-problem/report-a-problem-online>

- ✗ Participants were unhappy to hear that the area was taking on extra sewage – some guessed that this was a money-making activity and did not think this was acceptable.
- ✗ Description of the incident as '**unplanned**' incited anger as participants understood the acceptance of extra sludge to be an agreed process.
- ✗ Term 'sludge' felt to be jargon-y and skirting around what it actually is – human waste.
- ? Participants would have been pleased to hear of an **odour suppression system earlier in the year**; however, not only was this too late but participants understood from councillor updates that the system was not used 24-hours but only during working hours for Thames Water staff.
- ? Inclusion of a clear action plan and approximate timings is good – but this was not thought to reflect the reality, and at this **point participants didn't trust timings** having seen multiple missed timings through councillor communications.
- ? Information for finding out more was '**too little, too late**' at this point.
- ✓ **Pleased to see mention of this incident being avoided in future** – provided some reassurance, though participants don't trust Thames Water to keep to this.



Participants were generally dissatisfied with Thames Water's handling of the incident, particularly highlighting a perceived lack of communication and accountability

When asked to rank how well Thames Water handled the incident on a scale from 0 to 10, **most gave a score of one or below**

Frustration expressed towards:

- The length of the incident.
- Perceived slowness of incident resolution.
- The perceived lack of direct communication between Thames Water and local residents (apart from one letter in August, which was felt to arrive too late).

"When there's nothing and you have to rely on social media for your updates it just feels like the company don't care, so how's it going to get any better, how's it not going to happen again. There's no trust."

Vulnerable

When asked to name one thing that Thames Water did well during the incident, **participants struggled to think of anything**

- When pressed, a few people suggested they felt positively about the fact that the odour incident ended eventually – however most attributed responsibility for this to actions taken by local councillors and politicians rather than by Thames Water.
- A few also mentioned positive interactions with staff e.g. following up on complaints.

"[Thames Water] responded eventually to the unbearable pressure put upon them by the councillors."

Vulnerable

Most did not feel confident in Thames Water's ability to handle a future incident effectively and **want urgent action to be taken**

- Participants want to know what is being done to prevent the incident from reoccurring (most think this is likely). Some were comforted by the knowledge that the Environment Agency changed the company's permit for importing sludge.
- A few felt an investigation was needed into how the odour incident was allowed to continue for so long.

"If something like this happened at my work, we'd be out on our ear."

Home-based



Reported interactions between Thames Water and residents were ad hoc and inconsistent. Examples include:

- × **No follow-up** after multiple interactions with Thames Water via phone or email.
- × **Hearing a range of different reasons for the odour** from Thames Water after direct, active outreach from residents (e.g. sludge was due to be used on agricultural land but not accepted or deep clean rearranged by risk assessments).
- × Contacting Thames Water about the odour and being told it was a **blocked drain** at or around the property (this was experienced both over the phone and following a visit from an engineer).
- × Following communications via tweet or through website, a participant was informed that **complaints weren't categorised and registered as such** without specific wording describing it as an official complaint.
- × Phoning the treatment works over a few weeks and being consistently told the **site manager was on holiday**.
- × Phoning customer services at Thames Water and **staff not being aware of or briefed** on the incident (note: participants fed back that though staff were unable to help, they were very polite).

Participants were disappointed in Thames Water's response to direct communications for many reasons:

- **Lack of response**
- **Inconsistency – reason for incident**
- **Inconsistency – actions being taken**
- **Difficulty in making a complaint**
- **Lack of follow up after interactions**
- **Apparent lack of briefing at customer service call centre**

"They provided no support whatsoever. It was handled very badly by them."
Vulnerable

"Every time you spoke to someone they'd make up something new."
Vulnerable



Summary: what participants wanted from Thames Water communications



- **A simple explanation** of what was causing the odour – the transfer of sewage and the reasons for the delay in processing.
- **Admission** that it was coming from Thames Water's sewage treatment works.
- **An apology** and acknowledgement of the impact of the odour on participants.
- **A timed action plan** outlining what it was doing to suppress the odour, how it was resolving the issue.



- **Updates** on how the action was progressing.
- **Details** of any delays, reasons for them and how they would be dealt with.
- **New timings** for when participants should expect the odour to be dealt with.
- **Reassurance** that the odour is not impacting physical health.
- **Tips and tricks** for how to cope with the odour.



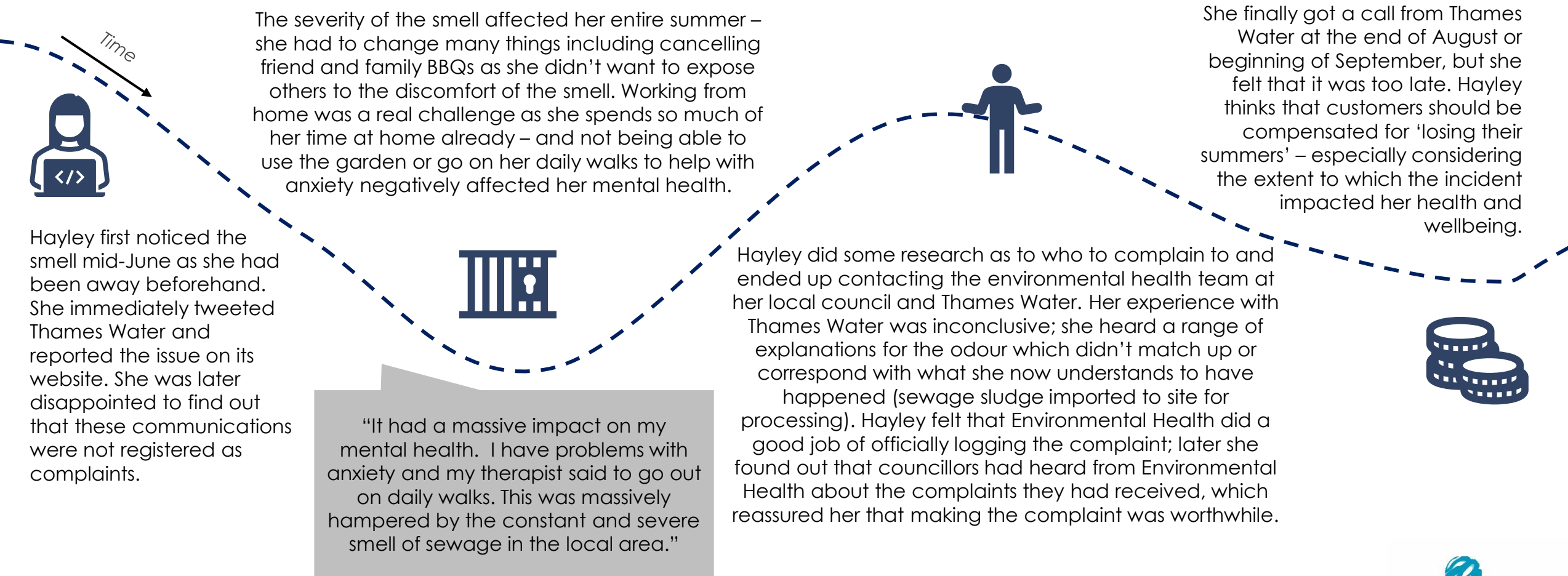
- **Confirmation** that the incident has been dealt with and that the odour is gone.
- **Measures** put in place to ensure that this does not happen again.
- **Resources** for how to get in touch to offer feedback on how the incident was dealt with.
- **Amends plan** with any information on how Thames Water was planning to make amends (e.g. with community funding) and whether compensation is available.
- **Apology** to people in the local area, taking ownership and apologising for the impact and disruption.



Case study: a very engaged participant who contacted alternative sources of information

Hayley* works from home full-time. She lives on a road situated just behind the treatment works.

SEVERITY: HIGH Hayley struggles with her mental health and goes for long walks every day to help with this – not being able to go outside strongly affected her wellbeing.



Expectations of support during and after incident



Participants told us they would have preferred communication from Thames Water confirming the incident was being addressed, rather than support to help mitigate the impact of the odour

- The most popular suggestion was to put in an **odour suppression system that worked effectively**.
- There was a general sense among participants that **those living closest to the treatment works were the most deserving** of support or recompense.
- Only a few mentioned financial support – either as compensation for perceived poor service or to offset increased energy from running fans and petrol costs from leaving the house to cope with the odour.

“To be honest I'd rather they just put more effort into solving the problem... let's fix this now, and make sure it never happens again.”
Home-based

“I was expecting them to fix the problem, not to recompense me with cheap lip service.”
Not home-based

“I don't know what they could have done to make our lives better in our homes, unless they want to pay my electricity bill for my fan.” *Vulnerable*

“I don't know how [those living nearby to the treatment works] managed. For them it must have been horrendous every single day, they were the people that needed help and support and I don't know that they got any.”
Home-based



Customers were largely dissatisfied with the speed of resolution of the incident, and told us they received no post-incident communications from Thames Water

Speed of resolution

- Participants were frustrated with what they felt was extremely slow resolution to the problem.
- This frustration was linked to them having received no company comms until August; this left the impression that the company took no action to resolve the odour until then.
- Participants felt the company only acted in response to pressure from councillors and their local MP.
- Some pointed out that the odour was only resolved in Autumn – a time where spending more time at home is common – perceived slow resolution meant that they felt the company failed to 'save their summer'. A few even suggested that the incident resolution had more to do with the weather than the actions of Thames Water.

"I don't trust them at all, I'll be on eggshells next summer."

Vulnerable

"They kind of fixed it just at the time we were closing all of our windows and turning the heating on."

Not home-based

"Would have been nice to know what the resolution was."

Not home-based

"On the website, there's no acknowledgement that anything has happened."

Not home-based

Communication since resolution

- Participants were frustrated that even after the issue was resolved, they were not notified – they felt this was discourteous and added to their suspicions that the incident could reoccur.
- Most importantly, participants wanted reassurance that the odour incident will not happen again and information about the measures that have been put in place to ensure it doesn't.



Financial compensation

- Participants felt it was **difficult to put a price** on the impact of the incident on individuals.
 - As strength of smell is hard to quantify, it's hard to judge who was affected, and to what extent.
- Whilst a few suggested **individual financial compensation** e.g. money off the wastewater bill for the spring/summer period, the general feeling was that this wouldn't necessarily make up for the impact; participants would prefer to see a **wider financial gesture** that would go towards supporting or boosting the community and show that they care.
- A few felt there was a stronger case for **compensating businesses** who were affected e.g. those who predominately operated outside.*
 - This is because for such businesses it is **easier to quantify their financial loss**.

"It's really hard to judge the quantifiable impact it has had."
Vulnerable

Reinvestment

Participants would like to see Thames Water focus its efforts on ensuring it does not happen again:

- Reinvestment in its services across the board - this was often seen as the top priority.
- A few were aware of the financial difficulties Thames Water are facing - there was some feeling that this incident was part of a bigger service issue.

In general, there were **very low expectations** of the kinds of compensation that Thames Water would actually provide.

"I don't think you can put a financial cost on it, it was more emotional. If you like, you can compare it to Covid...we all got on with it and did whatever we needed to do."
Not home-based

"How much is a lid [for the tank]? Shall we all club together?"
Home-based

A community contribution was a popular way for Thames Water to make amends

- Considering the difficulties in quantifying individual impact, a community contribution was seen as a fair way to **ensure all in the area would benefit**.
- Participants thought it important that this community contribution was **financial**.
 - There was a perception that as a profit-making company, this was the only way that Thames Water would be taking the idea of amends seriously.
- Suggested recipients of this community contribution included:
 - A local park
 - Community centre
 - Local charities
- Many felt that the **local community should decide** what the community contribution was for through consultation with the councillors, community groups, or a public vote.
- There was some awareness of Thames Water retracting the offer of financial community contribution in place of community hours* – those who did know were deeply disappointed at this. The idea of Thames Water contributing volunteering hours was **unpopular** – seen as punishing employees who were not directly responsible for the incident, with **limited consequences for senior leaders within the business**.

"If they were obliged to fork out compensation, it's less likely to happen again."

Home-based

"Feels like a decision made in a boardroom doesn't it...It'll help some people... but most of the community won't know what they've done... and yeah poor staff that have to do it."

Home-based

"That's not what these people [Thames employees] are paid to do....use the community groups, let's get some votes out for what would be a good thing to do."

Home-based

Participants didn't expect odour incidents to be included in the Guaranteed Standards Scheme (GSS)

In the focus groups we explored some examples of what water and/or wastewater companies provide compensation for.

- Most **did not expect** a **legal obligation** for compensation for odour incidents.
 - This was again in part due to the feeling that it is harder to quantify the impact of a bad smell compared to other kinds of water company incidents.
- However, there was a general feeling that **impact on quality of life** from this incident was much greater than some of the things listed in the GSS.
- There were also **comparisons made to other workplaces/ industries**, where compensation would have been given for lesser or similar incidents:
 - Airlines (late or cancelled flights)
 - Healthcare
 - Hospitality (receiving a free meal if there's a problem with your food)

"It's probably a bit easier to take a river sample near a storm drain and say look, this is before, this is after..."
Vulnerable

"It seems ridiculous to me that they'd not compensate someone for a summer of disgustingness but they'll compensate someone for an appointment being missed...this affected our quality of life much more than not having water for a day."
Not home-based

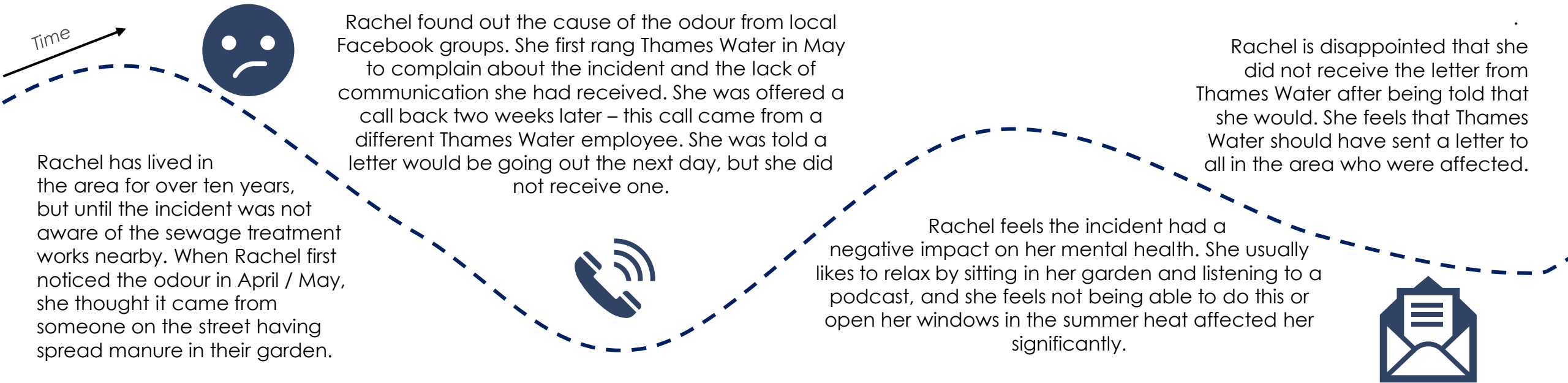
"Even if you have a bad meal, you get a free glass of wine or something...a token gesture to make it seem slightly less disingenuous."
Home-based



Case study: complained to Thames Water and was told to expect a letter, but did not receive one

Rachel* lives with her husband and her daughter.

SEVERITY: MODERATE Rachel's mental health suffered during the incident. When asked how easy it was on a scale of 0-10 to carry on with day-to-day life during the incident (where 10 is hard), Rachel gave 6.5.



"I like my community, I like making friends in my community, and people were really really affected by it, and it really does start to impact people's mental health."

"You cannot stay shut in your house with your windows shut, so for some people, myself included, it really affected me."

"We never got the famed letter."



Lessons learnt



1

Fully consider the impact of customers when managing an incident

- Ensure that processes are in place to assess the impact of incidents on customers in the area; for example, a risk assessment or appropriate framework should be used. At a minimum, customers should be provided with sufficient information and a timely resolution.
- Information, updates and resolutions should be customer-centric and ensure that customers feel valued and respected.
- Consider any potential health risks to affected residents from the outset and throughout the incident.

2

For odour incidents that last more than a few days – transparency is key from the start

- Important for residents living in the affected area to receive communications from the beginning of the incident when the odour becomes noticeable, or when a change at the sewage treatment site takes place, with a brief explanation of the source of the odour and the reason behind the odour.
- This communication will help to avoid speculation about what is causing the odour and prevent residents taking unnecessary action to investigate e.g. calling out plumbers or wastewater company to look at drains.
- Communicate with residents about any potential health risks to ease any worries or anxiety.
- Companies should provide information on how to get in touch, what actions are being taken to resolve the issue and where residents can find updates.
- Companies should offer support for any residents that have additional needs.
- Companies must be open in communicating with residents and be wary of implying that something happened by accident and using terms such as ‘unplanned’.



3

Company communications during a lengthy odour incident need to be frequent and reach all affected

- The impact of odour incidents is difficult to manage for those affected as it is hard to avoid or gain respite from the smell.
- Lack of up-to-date information causes anxiety and can lead to speculation; direct, regular communications show that the issue is being taken seriously by the water or wastewater company and provide tangible proof that there is a team working behind the scenes to resolve the problem. Relying on other sources diminishes trust and perception of the water or wastewater company.
- Providing updates on timings is crucial – the ‘not knowing’ is a key pain-point for residents impacted by odour incidents.
- Explanations should be clear and easy to understand, avoiding any jargon. Specifically, if using the term ‘sludge’ explain what this means and how it differs from sewage.

4

Ensure that incidents are well-known across the business and brief staff adequately

- Important that customer-facing staff are aware of the incident and are briefed with consistent, up to date and accurate information and resources to help those who reach out.
- Ensure that where residents’ queries or complaints are being investigated, follow ups are carried out and residents are kept updated.

5

Provide an apology, reassurance and a summary at the end of the incident

- Important to provide an apology, reassure customers and confirm that the issue has been successfully resolved.
- Provide information on what lessons have been learnt and what procedures will be put in place to ensure that a similar incident does not happen again (or if it does, how it will be better dealt with).





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