



BLUE MARBLE

Research into incident response

Overview of findings from customer research

Final report for Ofwat/CCW – August 2024

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Objectives and method



Context of wider research programme

Ofwat and CCW commissioned Blue Marble to conduct research with household customers to understand how people and households are affected when their water and wastewater services are disrupted. The research has been primarily focused on water or wastewater-related incidents that affect people in their homes or gardens or going about their daily lives. The programme aimed to apply this understanding to:

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

This is the final report from Ofwat and CCW's year long programme of research into people's experiences of incidents relating to the water sector. The findings should be considered closely by water companies and all those with an interest in the water sector and customer service.

The report identifies key areas of importance for customer service. It sets out ways in which companies can better support their customers. However, it should be seen as an evolving area - customer experiences, needs and preferences should be further monitored and understood. More information is available at: <https://www.ofwat.gov.uk/about-us/customer-research/customer-experiences/>



We conducted qualitative research across 5 separate incidents to understand customers' experiences

	Supply interruption	Boil water notice	Odour incident	Low pressure / supply interruption	Do not use / do not drink notice
Incident overview	Up to a week Urban & rural populations Thousands affected	3 days Rural location 3,000 properties affected	Approx. 6 months Highly populated 5,500+ properties and workers/visitors to the area affected	Up to 18 days Highly populated 12,700 properties affected	A week Small housing estate 300 properties affected
Water company	South East Water	Anglian Water	Thames Water	Yorkshire Water	Independent Water Networks Limited
Method overview	5 group discussions 12 depth interviews	3 group discussions 10 depth interviews	4 group discussions 10 intercept interviews	3 group discussions 9 depth interviews	11 intercept interviews 2 group discussions 6 depth interviews
Research conducted	July / August 2023	August / September 2023	October / November 2023	December 2023	March 2024

The incidents chosen for this research were selected from the pool of incidents available during the fieldwork period. Factors including type, scale, and impact of each incident were considered, and the inclusion of incident in the research programme does not itself reflect on the water company.

Reports on each individual incident, and full details on the methodology for each study, are available on the Ofwat and CCW websites.



Key themes emerging from the research



- 1 Overall lack of a customer-centric approach to incident management**

The way in which companies responded to incidents was, in many cases, not customer-centric. This exacerbated the challenges that these incidents caused for participants, with company responses falling short of their expectation.
- 2 Communications were often inadequate, and did not provide the information customers wanted and needed**

Company communications with participants during and after incidents have been a key driver of dissatisfaction. Participants have often felt left in the dark during incidents, unsure about what was happening, how long issues would last, what action they should take, and what support the company was offering, as well as how to access this support.
- 3 Support offered during incidents was not responsive to customers' actual experiences and needs**

This has been particularly true in terms of providing alternative water where necessary. Specifically, support for participants in vulnerable circumstances has often fallen short of expectations or customer needs. Participants in vulnerable circumstances (who may not have been on the Priority Services Register) often struggled to access the support they needed.
- 4 Support after incidents was often lacking**

Post-incident communications were often limited to confirmation of water safety – explanation or apology for the incident was rare. Participants wanted transparent and helpful post-incident communication from companies. With regard to any payments that customers may be entitled to (for example under the guaranteed standards scheme), participants wanted a process that is clear, fair, timely and simple.



Communication



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Companies should not underestimate the importance of good communication with customers

In the incidents we've explored, company communications have often exacerbated negative participant experiences of the incident. Key complaints include:

Speed

Slow communications, particularly at the start of incidents, caused uncertainty and, for some participants, anxiety. At worst, slowness has given the impression that the company does not care about its customers and led to speculation about the incident.

Detail

Key communications often lacked any details about the cause of the incident, a timeframe, clear customer instructions or the company response.

Accuracy

Many communications appeared scripted and not attuned to participant experiences of the incident in real time. For example, template answers to social media enquiries or vague, generic wording have undermined trust.

Empathy

Communications which have not felt empathetic to participants, acknowledging an appreciation of how stressful and difficult it can be for people to manage when things go wrong, have caused resentment.

"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." *Odour incident*

"It was a bit of a shock for me. I didn't hear from the supplier until later that evening." *Do not drink incident*



Community networks provide information quickly and effectively, but participants have often been unsure whether they can trust this.

- In the incidents we explored, most people first heard about the issue through their community networks – in other words, not directly from the company.
- Getting information through community networks can exacerbate anxiety levels in certain instances – for example, if there is speculation about the cause.

Participants affected by incidents wanted more direct communications from the company.

- Participants often only heard from companies later in the incident or, sometimes, not at all.
- When participants have tried to contact companies themselves, they often struggled to communicate effectively with their company, for various reasons:
 - Available channels not matching their needs
 - Capacity constraints (e.g. waiting times for call centres)
 - Channels not feeling joined up (e.g. call centre staff conveying different information to the information available online).

“The frustration is that even on social media, it was just information coming from other neighbours, nothing from [company] to say what the problem was, how long it might last for, or what to do to help. I think the worst of it was, you felt like you were in the dark.” *Low pressure/ supply interruption*

“I was waiting on the phone for ages just to get through to someone.”
Supply interruption

“I know that they came to the community centre and they were offering to speak with people. Unfortunately, I was working, and they came during the daytime.”
Do not use notice



During incidents, customers want to know what is happening so that they can manage their lives

Participants wanted accurate and up to date information that they could use to assess risk and take informed decisions about what to do.

Too often, communications have been paternalistic (“don't worry”) or vague (“we're working on it”). Specifically, participants wanted any details available about:

Cause

including any health risks where relevant

Timeframe

Including best available, realistic information

Support

What support is available and how to access this

Practical guidance

'dos and don'ts', especially where household actions could result in further disruption or health risks

Company response

What the company is doing to address the problems

Updates

Regular as the situation evolves

**"We need something solid: in the next days, weeks, what they are going to do. Some assurance that the situation is being handled well."
Supply interruption**

"I only found out further information because I went on [Yorkshire Water's] Twitter... Appalling. If you tweeted them to ask them a question on the tweet they had sent out, they would reply with the same thing... it was incredibly frustrating on Twitter." Low pressure/ supply

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



Companies need to improve their communication with customers during and after incidents, understanding that this is central to customers' experience when things go wrong.

1 Principles underlying communications

- The content and tone of company communications should:
 - show empathy that incidents are very stressful and difficult for people to manage; include an apology for the disruption caused;
 - ensure explanations are easy to understand, avoiding any jargon;
 - be open and honest; updates should be accurate (for example, on likely timescales, cause, any health risks), realistic, timely, and regular;
 - Be clear and assertive where there is a risk to health. Where there is no risk, companies should reassure to ease any customer worries.
- Companies should provide proactive communications about the 'dos and don'ts' relating to an incident. These are particularly important where household actions (or inactions) could result in further disruption – such as relevant safety information or damage to appliances.
- Customer-facing staff should be aware of the incident and briefed with consistent, up-to-date and accurate information and resources to help those who reach out.
- Companies should ensure that where customers' queries or complaints are being investigated, follow-ups are carried out, complaints can be escalated automatically and customers are kept updated.

2 Reaching affected customers

- Companies should ensure that all customers affected by an incident receive direct communications about the incident.
- Companies should use a range of digital and non-digital channels.
- Contact databases should be comprehensive and up-to-date. In the meantime, if records are incomplete, companies need a strategy in place for reaching customers, so that they can be told about the nature of the incident and the support available as quickly as possible. This will include using a variety of communications methods.
- As good practice, companies should enable customers who want to contact them to do so easily through their preferred channel, making it easy to locate relevant contact details.

3 For contamination events specifically

- Communications should be clear about which customers are affected and reassure those who do not need to act.
- Messages should be explicit about when the incident started, so customers know how long the risk has been present. Including the time when messages are issued will avoid confusion if there are delays in customers receiving these.
- Companies should inform and/or reassure people who have been drinking the water before they knew it should be boiled, or not consumed, about the level of risk to their health, and any actions they need to take.

Support during an incident



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During incidents, customers' support needs vary – above all, companies need an accurate, dynamic understanding of what customers are experiencing

To fully support customers when something goes wrong, companies need a strong understanding of differing customer needs for the range of incidents that can take place.

In general, customer needs can be considered in relation to:

- **Physical needs:** including access to drinking water, cooking, keeping clean, keeping your home clean, keeping warm (when reliant on central heating).
- **Mental wellbeing:** this includes receiving reassurance about the cause of an impact or information on any safety measures customers should be aware of. For example, for an odour incident this might include support for how to manage intrusive smells, and reassurance about any health concerns.
- **Financial needs:** while financial payment may be available after an incident, some customers will struggle with any additional expenses that may be required of them during an incident. This might include buying water or transport for picking up water; the cost of boiling water; or alternative accommodation.

Companies did not fully understand or meet the needs of customers in most of the incidents included in the research. This appeared to be for a range of reasons that included not realising the impact of the incident on customers; not appreciating the reach of customers affected; treating the incident as an infrastructure problem rather than a customer experience; not prioritising or fully empathising with the customers' experiences.

“It was like having your phone taken away. You feel empty – how do you function? All the fundamentals revolve around water.”
Do not use notice

“Simple tasks that you don't really think about become quite a challenge... something that you have to organise.”
Supply interruption

“I would give it an 8 [out of 10 in terms of difficulty], just because I suffer with mental health, I struggle to leave the house, so... anyone who would come to see me, they would bring me my water.”
Supply interruption



In many incidents, customers need alternative water supplies that are timely, sufficient and easy to access

Alternative water supply provision has been a central part of many of the incidents we have explored.

There are standards in place for how much water should be provided to customers per day, and expectations that those who are vulnerable and in need of support will receive a water delivery. But we found participants were often frustrated by companies' approaches to providing alternative water.

Issues included:

- insufficient number of water stations or amount of water provided
- water stations which were located too far away or inconvenient for people to access
- a lack of automatic provision of water deliveries to people's homes.
- slow deliveries (often after extensive prompting from participants).
- door drops which were inappropriate for the participants who needed them (because they were too heavy or placed in inaccessible locations).
- door drops which confused participants or even undermined trust – due to unbranded vans and workers, not informing participants the water was there, a lack of accompanying information and seemingly random distribution.

**"One of my neighbours, she's got very bad arthritis, and I popped over to see her and they'd left these massive two litre bottles and she couldn't pick it up."
*Boil Water notice***

**"The amount of water that was supplied by South East Water via bottles was insufficient because they gave us the statutory minimum that doesn't even flush a loo."
*Supply interruption***

**"In the rural areas that we all live in, unmarked white vans with two dodgy blokes coming out late at night, your immediate assumption is that they're thieves, or they're dog-nappers... So, that's not going to inspire confidence."
*Boil Water notice***



In most cases, companies could do more to reach those who are vulnerable and in need of support

Water companies use Priority Services Registers (PSRs) to record those who may have additional needs for a variety of reasons, and to understand more about what these needs may be. A well maintained PSR is essential for companies to provide the support their customers need.

Companies should also be aware that customer needs are likely to vary depending on the nature and length of an incident. For example, customers may have specific needs when a water supply incident lasts for several days rather than for several hours. This research has highlighted four specific challenges around the support that companies have offered these participants:

- 1** Awareness of PSRs has been very low, even among those who might be eligible for them.

**"You would think you know, if you're a priority, that you would be contacted but no nothing."
Supply interruption**
- 2** Even the relatively small number of vulnerable participants on PSRs have often been unaware of the specific support that they are entitled to when things go wrong.

**"It felt rubbish having to call constantly."
Low pressure and no water incident**
- 3** The provision of priority services to vulnerable participants has sometimes failed to meet accepted standards or been inappropriate for their needs.
- 4** We heard from some vulnerable participants that they requested extra support during incidents but were told by their company they were not eligible.

**"I didn't hear of any water deliveries"
Supply interruption**



Companies should respond to customers' lived experience of incidents, dynamically adapting their plans as the situation requires.

1. Provision of alternative water supplies

- Companies are already required to provide alternative supplies of water to all customers in specific circumstances (e.g. no water supply). Companies should, as good practice, consider the needs of all customers for alternative water when facing ongoing water pressure problems or, for example, boil water notices.
- In providing water stations companies should ensure they are set up quickly, are conveniently located, staffed, communicated with up-to-date information about supplies, to prevent wasted journeys. They should provide the statutory minimum of water per person – more if possible. Where necessary, restricting the amount of water per customer to prevent stockpiling – but restrictions should be proportionate to household size and customer circumstances.
- PSR water delivery operation, especially where outsourced, should be professionally handled e.g. providing support for those unable to carry water supplies, giving better information with water deliveries, with delivery updates, and using branded hi-viz uniforms and signage to reassure customers of the operator's legitimacy.

2. Understanding the needs of vulnerable customers

- Companies should keep their PSR up to date. This includes having a good understanding of the needs of customers on their PSR, and how these needs may change, depending on the type or length of an incident.
- Companies should ensure those on the PSR understand what services to expect, what support they are entitled to, with opportunities to request additional services if these are needed.
- Where appropriate, companies should provide relevant support to customers on the PSR automatically, rather than requiring them to request it.
- Vulnerable customers – who may not be on the PSR – should be able to request a water delivery if they need it and companies must respond.
- Support should be prompt and well communicated, with proactive updates (for example, on the time of deliveries).

3 Provision of additional support

- Companies should consider where additional financial and practical support (beyond the provision of alternative water supplies) may be necessary – for example, setting up schemes to cover the costs of unexpected hotel stays, launderette visits, or meals which cannot be cooked at home.
- Companies should ensure that such schemes are well publicised, as well as easy for customers to access and use.
- Companies should provide additional support to those who need it.
 - This could include up-front financial support to those for whom incurring out-of-pocket expenses represents a significant financial and mental burden.
 - As well as extra practical support for those who are unable or would find it difficult to access this – for example, help to visit a launderette or source alternative meals.

Support after an incident



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Customers want transparent and helpful post-incident communication from companies

In many of the incidents we explored, participants reported not receiving much by way of post-incident communication from their company.

- Any communication was often limited to confirmation that water was safe to drink in incidents where water safety was a central issue (i.e. Boil Water Notices or “Do Not Use” notices), but not in the case of supply interruptions, even where participants perceived water quality issues.
- It was rare for participants to recall receiving any explanation for the incident or an apology from their water company.

Across all incidents, participants consistently said they wanted post-incident communication which:

- ✓ **Confirms that the incident is over** and that the water is safe to use as normal (including for supply interruption and low pressure incidents, where the water company may not necessarily consider there to be a safety issue).
- ✓ **Explains what happened** during the incident, how the company resolved it and what the company has done to reduce the chance of the problem recurring.
- ✓ **Apologises** for the incident and the impact on customers.
- ✓ **Provides contact details** for any customers who continue to experience issues with their water supply.
- ✓ **Clearly explains processes for payments** under the Guaranteed Standards Scheme (GSS) and any other steps the company is taking to make amends for the incident (such as a community contribution).
- ✓ **Raises awareness of the Priority Services Register (PSR)** and the practical assistance that the company can provide for customers in need.
- ✓ **Includes practical tips for customers** (dos and don'ts) in the event of any future, similar incidents.



Clear

- In many cases, participants were not provided with clear information about their entitlement to any payment under the Guaranteed Standards Scheme (GSS) or company scheme, or the process for receiving or applying for a payment.
- Sometimes companies were not upfront at the outset about reimbursements – for example being able to claim for purchases of bottled water if participants kept receipts.

Timely

- For financially vulnerable participants, payments have often been too slow – meaning that they have struggled to cope with financial shortfalls caused by the incident itself (see case study).

Case study: compensation for financially vulnerable households

Jack* lives with his partner and 3-year-old daughter. He is disabled due to a leg operation that went wrong, and is on disability benefits but is not aware of being on the Priority Services Register (PSR). The family uses a pre-pay meter for their gas and electricity.

During a Boil Water Notice, they had to cut down on electricity usage to be able to boil water. They got £15 in compensation but spent a lot more than that on electricity. They felt the compensation amount was insulting.

“We're on a prepaid meter and running out of electricity with a 3-year-old [saying]: 'why's the telly not working daddy?’”

*Names have been changed.



Fair

- Companies' processes have often not felt fair. For example:
 - When a high number of customers did not receive a financial payment when they felt they should have done.
 - When amounts were higher for participants who complained about the amount they had received.
 - When payments seemed at odds with company commitments (such as a customer charter).

Simple

- Numerous barriers to participants applying for a GSS payment mean that many have not received anything for the reduction in service they have experienced. These include:
 - Low awareness of what is available.
 - The perceived effort of applying.
 - Belief that making a claim could harm their standing with the company.
 - Reluctance to "make a fuss".

Case study: fair practices

Paul* has been registered disabled for 12 years and has been on the Priority Services Register (PSR) since about then. He reported on and off problems with the water supply for several days. He now has 2 children under 2, including a baby that was a week old when the outage happened.

Paul knows that an elderly neighbour on the PSR received a water delivery. South East Water told him via telephone he would get a delivery, but he did not receive one. He was disappointed and felt he "slipped through the net".

When speaking to South East Water via telephone, he asked for compensation and was told he was not entitled to it. He took them at their word. He was astonished to learn about the GSS during the focus group, and photographed the stimulus material to ensure he had a record of his rights.

**Names have been changed.*



Sector learning: after an incident

Companies should communicate with customers after incidents and make the GSS payment process easy for customers to understand and access.

Post-incident communications

- Companies should offer a genuine apology for the disruption experienced, even if the cause was felt to be out of the company's control.
- End of incident communications should provide any reassurance that customers may need - for example that they can resume using tap water, as well as any practical steps needed (run water for a certain amount of time) before using.
- Companies should 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).
- Companies should take the opportunity in post-incident communications to raise awareness of their PSR and the additional practical assistance they can give to people in vulnerable circumstances.

Guaranteed Standards Scheme and other company payments

- Payments should always be made to customers in a timely way, and when possible, should be automatic.
- When making decisions about financial payments, companies should have a good and realistic understanding of the true impact of incidents on customers.
- Companies should have clear and well-publicised information about the GSS and any other relevant customer charters on their website and other communications, ensuring that all eligible customers receive the appropriate payment in a reasonable timescale.
 - Companies should consider the needs of customers who may not be able to take steps to cover their needs during an incident, such as PSR, social tariff, and financially vulnerable customers.

**Conclusion: becoming
customer centric**



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In many cases, companies did not take a customer-centric approach when responding to incidents

Across the incidents we've explored, we've consistently seen that customers are often not at the heart of companies' responses. Too often, companies have been focused on their operational response to things going wrong, working hard to restore a normal service but seemingly unaware of what their customers were experiencing while this was ongoing.

Across this research, customers' experiences of incident response have been better where companies:

- Started with a strong understanding of what customers would be going through, and integrated this into all aspects of their response;
- Kept up-to-date with customer needs and experiences as the incident progressed, adapting their approach accordingly;
- Provided support for customers which was considered, tailored and nuanced;
- Communicated with customers in a way that resonated with customers' experiences.

"I don't think I would have been offered any support if I hadn't rung up and complained."

Low pressure/ supply interruption

"I phoned their call centre ...and the chap said no no...everything's fine...they simply hadn't told anyone in their call centres or updated their website to reflect that there was an issue ongoing."

Supply interruption

The research shows that the way companies respond to incidents is vital to building and maintaining customers' trust. Companies must challenge themselves to do the best they can for customers in managing and resolving incidents when they occur.



Companies should ensure customers' needs and experiences are central to the way that they manage incidents.

Understanding customer impact

- Companies should ensure that processes are in place to assess the impact of incidents on customers in the area, even for incidents considered internal or primarily operational; for example, a risk assessment or appropriate framework should be used. At a minimum customers should be provided with sufficient information and resolution.
- Companies should consider any potential health risks to affected residents from the outset and throughout the incident.
- Companies should monitor how the impact of incidents unfolds as the incident progresses – this is particularly important for larger or more significant incidents, where customers' experiences and needs may change over time and be different to what the company expects.

Considering customer impact in internal / operational processes

- Companies should make customer impact central to incident response plans – for example, by incorporating customer experience into considerations around incident classification and prioritisation of resources.
- Companies should categorise the nature of an ongoing water service incident with consideration to vulnerable consumers and those on the PSR, as the categorisation determines the level of support (e.g. deliveries of bottled water, water stations) that is provided.
- Information and updates should be customer-centric to ensure that customers feel valued and respected.
- Companies should also update internal communications plans to ensure customer experience is at the heart of these.



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