

Winter weather 2018 review & learning

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Introduction

Northumbrian Water Limited supplies water and sewerage services to just under **4.4 million people**. Water is supplied to **794,000** properties in Essex & Suffolk, with water and sewerage services provided to **1.3 million** properties in the North East of England. Our mission is to be national leader and we believe this means providing an unrivalled customer experience to our customers, all of the time.

In late February and early March 2018, severe winter weather impacted much of the UK, causing disruption across much of the country. Ofwat requested all water companies in England and Wales to report on their performance throughout the freeze and thaw event, outlining their preparation, planning, operational approach and any customer service impacts.

We are pleased Ofwat's analysis described Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water as performing well and largely meeting our customers' expectations. We always take seriously our responsibilities to keep excellent quality water flowing, to protect the environment and to provide unrivalled customer service every day.

We have a strong and well embedded continuous improvement ethos and as expected in such extreme weather conditions, there will always be lessons we can learn. We have carried out our own review to identify how we can improve our responses to similar events in the future.

Ofwat requested companies publish responses proportionate to any matters they raised when assessing our performance, and this document sets out our response.

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Beast from the East overview

Between 27 February and 10 March 2018, our three operating areas in Essex, Suffolk and the North East of England were affected by the Beast from the East. This severe weather event caused significant disruption to homes, businesses and infrastructure across the country with freezing temperatures for many days and then a rapid thaw.

We are pleased to confirm throughout this period, our customers experienced no major disruption to services. Our teams worked round the clock to deal with many operational challenges and were well prepared to make sure we kept the water flowing for our customers.

That said, we are far from complacent and will continue to review our approach whenever events of this nature occur to make sure we always deliver unrivalled service and minimise disruption for our customers.

Planning and preparation

Ofwat has stated we had planned for and managed the event effectively. They noted we were well prepared, implemented plans early and despite facing challenging weather conditions, did not have to trigger full incident management process.

Planning and pre-planning is of critical importance when managing an event like the Beast from the East. We were well prepared for the severe weather, having learnt from previous harsh winters the types of disruption they can cause. Through many years of experience we have built up our knowledge and have tried and tested plans to deal with this type of extreme freeze and thaw weather. Since the harsh winter of 2010-11, we routinely put in place winter weather plans, increasing resource availability over key periods to make sure any disruption to our customers is minimised.

Throughout the year we closely monitor the weather and receive forecasts and updates from the Met Office several times a day. This allows us to prepare well in advance, make sure we have the right resources in place at the right time, and that our assets are protected to deal with whatever the weather brings.

In terms of the Beast from the East, we organised our teams to be in the right locations to serve our customers – this meant many of our people worked from home so they were closer to the communities we serve, and could attend customer issues as quickly as possible. Team members also made arrangements to stay in hotels close to our customer contact centre in Durham. This planning ahead, along with our ability to handle contacts at sites in both Durham and Essex, made sure we were available to answer customer calls twenty four hours a day and throughout the severe weather.

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Our road networks were hugely disrupted through the severe weather, with some major arterial routes closed at times. Access was particularly challenging in rural areas and so we prepared in advance by hiring in additional 4x4 vehicles to make sure we could reach our customers and attend our assets. We also worked closely with local farmers to get access roads cleared to some remote sites.

Our review of performance during the Beast from the East identified an opportunity to take a more coordinated approach with the use of our total vehicle fleet. Certain non-essential activities were suspended leaving some vehicles which were suitable for winter weather use, potentially available for operational teams. In future events we will monitor vehicle availability closely to make sure we have all suitable transport in use.



As mentioned, ahead of the extreme weather, we took the decision to reprioritise non-emergency and essential work, so our teams and our supply partners had capacity to quickly respond to any issues as and when they occurred. The ability to be flexible when events like this occur is critical.

Long term investment in our water networks has increased their resilience. We were able to increase water storage to maximum levels ahead of the severe weather arriving, and our resilience allows us to move water around our networks.

This means we can easily rezone areas should an interruption occur and quickly get our customers back into supply.

Our response during the event

Ofwat welcomed that we had sufficient resources in place throughout the event to maintain supplies to customers and minimise the risk of disruptions. Ofwat also recognised we have good visibility of the performance of our network.

During the severe weather period our customer and operational teams had regular discussions every day to understand current issues and plans at a local, regional and national level. This was essential as the nature of the weather meant the situation was constantly changing. Technology such as Skype, WhatsApp and teleconferencing allowed team members to stay in touch virtually.

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This was especially beneficial for geographically remote teams and for a number of key employees who were themselves snowed in.

Our standby arrangements meant we had people at all levels from technicians and customer advisors to senior managers and directors available at all times.

We have well established and tested incident escalation protocols in place. Throughout the severe weather and with highly effective local management of issues across our regions, our teams were able to respond and resolve issues without the need for escalation to a full incident.

We have Regional Control Centres in the north east and south east of England with technology that allows us to closely monitor our water treatment works and water networks real time. We can identify any potential issues quickly, before they have any customer impact, and where necessary we can move water around the network to maintain supplies. During the severe weather period, our waste water teams supported the regional control centre in the north east by setting up their own local control rooms to handle telemetry alarms. This ensured a continued focus on protecting the environment, whilst freeing up time in the Regional Control Centre to concentrate on the resilience and security of the water supply and network.

Despite a notable increase in bursts during the freeze thaw period, there were minimal customer impacts over and above those we would experience during normal operations. In line with our industry leading interruptions to supply performance, our philosophy to focus on keeping the water flowing to our customers remained a key priority.

In our Northumbrian region, only 0.10% of our customers experienced an interruption and in Essex & Suffolk 0.63%. Where interruptions did occur, the vast majority were fully restored within four hours.

We fully recognise the need to find and to repair leaks quickly and this year we have increased the size of our teams who carry out this important work. We are also using data science and technology such as satellite imagery to help identify leaks. So far this has been very successful and we will continue to look at innovations that can help tackle leakage.

Whilst the interruptions to supply we experienced were minimal and only a very small amount of alternative water supplies were needed, we do recognise this could have been very different. Our review of the event highlighted the need to consider our planning and availability of alternative water supplies, something we know was a common theme across the sector. We will look at what needs to be done to make sure our links to relevant suppliers equipment (such as tankers) and bottled water resources are strong and resilient, and that we have clearly understood protocols in place to initiate these.

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Communication and support

Ofwat noted during the severe weather our active campaign to help customers prepare for winter events and that communication with customers and stakeholders appeared to work well.

For many years we have carried out customer communication and press campaigns during winter months to share advice on how to protect pipework and avoid burst water pipes. Information can be found on our websites and our communications now extend to social media. We also encourage customers to watch out for and report any leaks.

Where leaks occur on our customers' pipework, we will provide advice and guidance about repairs and also signpost customers to WaterSafe accredited plumbers. In certain circumstances, and particularly where customers are in vulnerable situations, we will carry out repairs on their behalf.

Looking to the future at how we can further help customers to detect leaks on their pipework, we are investigating opportunities to use SMART in-home technology.

During the free thaw, and whenever interruptions to supply occur, we use SMS messaging to make sure our customers are informed proactively and have the latest news as repairs take place as to when supplies will be restored. We also call any customers on our Priority Services Register and ensure bottled water is delivered to them whenever required.

Social media can be extremely useful during events to share messages with customers and throughout the Beast from the East we actively used Twitter and Facebook to do so.



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As well as providing advice and updates we also used social media and our websites to show customers the conditions our teams were facing, working round the clock to keep water flowing and protect the environment. This helped people understand some of the challenges being faced and we received many positive messages of support.

For business customers, our team were able to make contact with those directly affected and with their relevant retailer. As a precautionary measure we also attempted to contact a number of additional retailers and did experience some difficulty in being able to do this. It was clear that some retailers were struggling to resource their own call centres and this restricted our ability to engage with them. We recognise recent changes requiring retailers to share emergency contacts will improve communications in the future and we are committed to working with the rest of the industry in this area. Our previous experience of extreme winter weather also allowed us to target certain types of premises which are more at risk of leakage immediately – for example caravan parks.

After any major event, such as The Beast from the East, we carry out our own reviews to identify any learning and areas for improvements. We also complete exercises to test our plans and responses to events. This allows us to learn in a safe environment where we can be better when it comes to incident responses and customer service. Indeed, an exercise is currently being planned and will take place later this year to test out our customer communications and use of social media during events. The learning we gain from this will help us improve communication with our customers moving forward.

Throughout the Beast from the East, we were in touch with our Local Resilience Forums, local authorities, local farmers and other agencies whom we have good relationships with. The support they were able to give allowed us to effectively respond to events, overcome some of the travel challenges we faced and attend our assets as and when issues occurred. Nurturing these relationships is an important aspect of our ability to be resilient and effective during severe winter weather.

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Vulnerable customers

Ofwat recognised the steps we take to identify and support customer and highlighted the need for all companies to do more of this.

We agree with Ofwat's sentiment that there is always more we can do to reach out to our customers who require extra help and support. During any event, our first priority is to make contact with all customers on our Priority Services Register. This allows us to check they are well and if necessary, in the case of interruptions to supply, to arrange for bottled water to be delivered for them.

In May this year we launched our new Inclusivity Strategy which sets out our future plans when it comes to supporting those customers that would benefit from extra help the most. This includes increasing the numbers of customers on our Priority Services Register from 2.5% to 7% by 2020, through targeted communication and engagement. We recently started this with our 'Water without the Worry' campaign.



We plan to raise awareness of the extra help and support we can offer and by 2022 we aim to increase awareness of our Priority Services Register from 44% to 65%. In addition, we are training all of our customer facing employees and supply partners to make sure they are knowledgeable about all of the help we can offer and actively look to promote this with our customers. We are also working with other utilities such as UK Power Networks and Northern

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Powergrid to explore how we can safely and securely share information to improve our service to those customers that need extra support.

We will continue to work with our customers and colleagues across the water sector and beyond to identify good practice and learning, to make sure we remain focused on delivering unrivalled service to those customers who need additional support and help.

Summary

From our overall experience of the Beast from the East, we have identified a number of learning points that are key when managing an event of this nature. These include:

- The importance of planning and pre-planning so our teams and assets are well prepared.
- Having people with the right experience and knowledge locally who are empowered to make decisions quickly.
- Being flexible and able to adapt our plans as and when situations change – something we experienced many times daily.
- Making the most of communication technology such as Skype and WhatsApp to keep in touch with teams across our operating areas.
- Having a resilient water network which we can monitor real time and is integrated, allowing us to move water around thus minimise disruption for our customers when problems do occur.
- Maintaining good relationships and communication with business customer retailers is important.
- Having flexible, motivated and well trained teams whose priority was to serve our customers throughout.
- Establishing and maintaining relationships and ways of working with Local Resilience Forums and other agencies who can support us during extreme weather.
- Ensuring resilient and secure alternative water plans and resources are in place, with clear protocols about how to initiate them.

We will continue to work and collaborate with colleagues across the industry, with our regulators Ofwat, the Drinking Water Inspectorate and Consumer Council for Water and through Water UK to make sure lessons and good practice during the Beast from the East are shared.

There will always be areas for improvement and we recognise the absolute need for ongoing learning in order to make sure our response to such events and our ability to keep water flowing to our customers continues to be our priority.

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