

Background and Context

In early January 2005, the North East region suffered a period of heavy rainfall, resulting in many swollen rivers and streams. On the night of 8 January, the force of high levels of water brought down trees and debris which severed the main water supply pipes located one and a half metres under the river bed of the Tyne, just west of Hexham, which linked the main reservoir with the town of Hexham and the surrounding areas of lower Tynedale.

Within hours, over a thousand properties had lost their water supply. Within two days, 10,000 properties were relying on emergency supplies. Schools, doctors surgeries, and a busy leisure centre were closed, and businesses advised not to open. Supplies were gradually restored over the next 6 days, although the supply of bottled water continued until 17 January. Schools re-opened after a week.

How the Topic was Handled

The agencies involved included:

- Northumbrian Water: based at a multi-agency forward control located at Tynedale District Council offices in Hexham, with an incident control room at Howdon Treatment Works.
- Tynedale District Council: based at Hexham.
- Northumberland Emergency Planning Unit: based at Morpeth in Northumberland, with reps sent to Hexham.
- Northumbria Police: based at Ponteland in Northumberland with reps sent to Hexham.
- Northumbria Fire Service: based at Morpeth, Northumberland with reps sent to Hexham.
- Health Protection Agency: based in Newcastle, with reps sent to Hexham.
- Government Office for the North East (GONE): based in Newcastle with reps sent to Hexham.

A multi-agency meeting was held at 4pm on the following day (Sunday) at Tynedale District Council Offices in Hexham.

- A temporary measure was implemented because it was not possible to repair the pipes. A plan was commenced to replace them with a temporary 3 kilometre water main including the construction of a temporary crossing of the River Tyne using a single pipe physically placed on the footpath deck of the existing road bridge.
- Water bowsers were put in place at 9 locations in Hexham, and a further 70 static water tanks were placed in the affected area as well as supplies of bottled water being distributed. A minimum 10 litres per person per day was provided in line with the Security and Emergency Measures Directive, 1998.
- Mutual aid was secured from United Utilities (equipment and drivers) and a local company Excel Logistics (low loaders and tankers).

- A telephone customer contact centre was established by Northumbrian Water, manned on a 24 hour basis.
- Information was published on the Northumbrian Water website, customer service telephone line and BBC interactive.
- Emergency letters were issued to all affected households by Northumbrian Water explaining the problem and the appropriate actions required to conserve water.
- Special measures were invoked to ensure continued supplies to Hexham General Hospital and all local care homes.
- The closure of schools was invoked in Hexham, together with a council-run leisure centre and swimming baths until further notice.
- Plans were put in place to contact with 400 local businesses on the morning of the following day (Monday) to advise them of the situation and urge them not to open. A particular focus was placed on food processing businesses.
- Public information notices were provided to the local radio station and local press.
- In view of Ministers concerns regarding the on-going flooding situation in Carlisle, daily reports were sent by GONE to Ministers via DEFRA Water Supply and Regulatory Division, Drinking Water Inspectorate, the Regional Co-ordination Unit, and Civil Contingencies Secretariat in the Cabinet Office.

Timescales

- By Day 3, 10,000 properties were supplied with temporary supply of emergency water from bowsers and bottles.
- By Day 5, the first temporary pipe was operational to supply around 1,100 properties.
- By Day 12, temporary pipes were in place to restore normal supply.

Other Impacts and Issues

- The Local Authority Chief Executive maintained a high profile throughout and attended all of the multi agency meetings.
- It took over a week to catch up with some council functions which were impacted, eg. domestic waste collection. Mutual aid was provided from a neighbouring council.
- Schools and a Leisure Centre were out of action for a week.
- The County Council Trading Standards Dept distributed public advisory leaflets about bogus tradesmen who could circulate in the area.
- Care Homes operated normally because of the efforts of the Fire Service in supplying water supplies suitable for flushing toilets.
- There were no GP reports of abnormal levels of infection.
- The Police Station at Hexham remained open but there were no intakes of prisoners.
- The public and local businesses were patient and generally good natured and expressed appreciation of the public information campaign.

- The Chairman of Northumbrian Water, Sir Fred Holliday, attended a multi-agency meeting to express his gratitude, talked to residents and addressed the local media. He also spent an hour helping to hand out bottled water.

Lessons Identified

- Early intervention by a multi-agency group helps to facilitate all aspects of response and recovery and helps in the vital process of recognising likely problems ahead.
- The value of high profile leadership, from the Company Chairman and the Local Authority Chief Executive, should not be underestimated.
- Warning and Informing the Public is a vital capability and requires careful co-ordination of effort across agencies. It can be the issue by which the response and recovery are judged by the public. The public are more content when they receive information, even if it is bad news.
- Regional Resilience Teams have an important role in terms of acting as an information link between local responders and Central Government Departments

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