

## **ICG Review of Dŵr Cymru's Response to the Freeze- Thaw Event December 2022**

As chair of the Dŵr Cymru Independent Challenge Group (ICG) I am pleased to have been asked by Peter Perry CEO Dwr Cymru to contribute to independent reviews of the Freeze - Thaw experience in December 2022.

The weather conditions over the period were exceptional as measured against national weather data, in particular the sudden rise in temperature following a long cold spell. A significant number of customers, over 20000 households, were potentially affected at some point through the event. There was significant interruption to water supply for over 15000 customers, with over 10000 losing water for 2 days or over and 51 for 7 days. The area impacted in west and mid Wales covered a large area of rural Wales extending into Herefordshire, with a separate incident impacting part of Monmouthshire in the same period.

The company have completed a series of internal reviews and debrief meetings with partners following the event. A report based on these findings, identifying lessons learnt, was submitted to Ofwat on February 28th. In addition, the company commissioned two independent reviews to supplement their internal reporting to be completed by the end of March.

This review supported by the Independent Challenge Group (ICG) focuses on the customer perspective, in particular Dŵr Cymru's:

- preparation to support customers in advance of the event.
- communication with customers during the event
- effectiveness in providing alternative supplies.
- fulfilling of obligations to vulnerable customers and those on the priority services register.
- arrangements for compensation for domestic and business customers.

Dŵr Cymru also commissioned Jacobs Engineering to undertake an independent review to focus on the operating performance of the company through the event.

This ICG report is based on interviews with external stakeholders impacted by the Freeze- Thaw. This included the MP, MS, Councillors, Local Authority officers, and representatives of the voluntary sector in the most affected areas.

### **Preparation to support customers in advance of the event.**

The company had undertaken preparations for winter and adopted learning from previous events, but the nature of this event put extreme stress on systems, which were not always able to cope with the challenge. The initial response was viewed as being *"a bit of scramble"* and *"frantic"* in nature.

The company was commended for taking leadership action in chairing the Tactical Coordinating Group under the Dyfed Powys Local Resilience Forum structure, but key senior contacts responsible for civil contingencies in local authorities were not effectively engaged in advance or over the initial phase of the event when its significance was becoming clear.

The company had undertaken communication with customers in preparation for winter, but the effectiveness can be regarded as limited with up to 60% of the water loss leading to supply issues being attributed to customer side leakage, with causes related to the rural nature of the area.

There was early action taken to support priority service customers was provided, with contact being made to those in potential risk in advance of the event. This was limited to those who were able to receive mass text messages or emails.

### **Recommendations**

1. The relationship at Local Authority level needs to be prioritised with a clearer early communication with senior officers responsible for civil contingencies. The Dyfed Powys Local Resilience Forum provides an important function but operates across a large geographical area, but the nature of the response required in such events requires direct and immediate engagement with the Local Authority.
2. There are opportunities for greater collaboration with local authorities on preparation and preventative action such as the preparation for winter communications to the public and vulnerable citizens. There is also potential for targeted engagement with farming community including through Farming Connect.
3. The early communication with priority service customers was positive, but issues were raised over the reach of that communication via text and email but also its content in respect to actions and expectations of support available. This should be reviewed with customers and the respective support agencies.

### **Communication with customers during the event**

The scale of the problem resulted a very large demand from customers to both register loss of water and to access accurate information. The data from the Dŵr Cymru call centre indicated a much-improved performance from previous major incidents, but an inability to register the problem was a frustration for some customers. Feedback has highlighted the value of customers being able to register a problem via the web site. The more significant issue though was access to accurate information on current status. Internal reviews have already identified the need to improve the information available to customers via the "In Your Area" map.

The experience demonstrated that for many customers the Local Authority becomes the default option for information and support.

Ceredigion Council reported the high levels of contact from residents and highlighted difficulty in working in partnership with the company in the initial 48 hour period but stressed that after that they had "*nothing but praise*" for the work of the company in trying to resolve the issues. The Council specifically mentioned the early commitment from the company to reimburse expenditure which allowed them to procure and distribute bottled water, mobilising their own employees and providing direct support to priority locations such as care homes.

Both Ceredigion and Powys Councils mentioned the inadequacies of the internal mapping tool used by the company as a means of them working with the company to identify areas impacted to facilitate communication with residents

The company's communication during the event relied on text, email and social media. Questions were raised as to the reach of these means in a rural community. Community resilience based on strong local connections is a feature of the area, through elected representatives and voluntary organisations acting as community hubs.

The critical role of Local Authority and Community/Town Councillors came to the fore in providing front line support to their communities, acting as a conduit between residents and the company. In many cases they were able to supplement the company's own information more accurately identifying where which households had or did not have water supply.

*"I was receiving regular briefings from the (local authority) emergency planning team and the commentary I was getting from them was completely out of synch with the position (of the company) on social media."*

After the initial phase communication from the company with these key intermediaries was complimented.

*"Communication was excellent from Welsh Water and from our county councillors who it appeared were working closely with Welsh Water"*

The ability of the company to enter into dialogue in Welsh in an area with a high percentage of first language Welsh speakers was particularly welcomed. The regular high level updates with elected officials and the responsiveness of Dwr Cymru staff was mentioned positively. A number identified Heulyn Davies as deserving special recognition.

After the initial phase customers were in general understanding of the challenges faced by the company, with a number of positive comments being registered on the web site and in interviews for this report.

*"The only thing I would say is that the Dwr Cymru staff were brilliant, working all hours to get the pipes back up and running."*

The Consumer Council for Water have also noted that:

*"We saw no increase in contacts resultant from freeze/thaw and felt that the company's communication with us was of a good standard".*

If the initial phase was challenging so was the process of communication to inform customers of water supply being returned to normal.

*"The only issue with the communication was that it suggested that the problem would be fixed much sooner than it actually was so people got their hopes up and we put off going to get water because we thought it would be fixed."*

Comments were made about an "avalanche of text messages" giving changing information on when water was to be restored, raising hopes and frustrations in equal measure. There were obviously technical challenges in reconnections which led to the company issuing confirmation of restored supply when it had not taken place.

## Recommendations

4. The role of intermediaries in carrying information on behalf of the company and providing feedback should be a critical element of the communication plan. This should include Local Authority Councillors, key LA officers, Chairs/Clerks of Town and Community Councils, Community Connectors, Community Hub managers.
5. The internal mapping tool used by the company should be reviewed to make it more easily accessible for partners.
6. The timelines given for reconnection need to err on the side of caution to avoid raising hopes. The lessons from the specific challenges of reconnecting in this case need to be understood and applied in future communications.
7. It was also suggested that the reconnection communication should include requests to reduce water usage in the immediate period after supply is restored.

## The effectiveness in providing alternative supplies.

The provision of alternative supplies was one of the issues most raised in the review. The scale of need, size and rural nature of the area affected brought real difficulties.

The initial distribution points of Llandysul and Newcastle Emlyn were inaccessible for large parts of the area, due to distance, levels of car ownership in some communities eg in Pencader over 50% of households have no car. There were also issues highlighted around the operation of these locations.

*“The only thing I do wish had happened was that we had a water station earlier in Cardigan, and when it did arrive, it was firstly situated in Station Road, where the residents all had water (over the bridge). Once it was put in the Swimming Pool carpark, it was easier for people to collect their water” (NB the company was advised on location by Local Authority)*

*“Llandysul distribution point on the one-way system made access difficult”, “it was a “free for all” while others said, “it was too tightly controlled not allowing supplies for neighbours to be picked up” “Supplies ran out”.*

Ceredigion CC secured 55000 litres and received 35000 donated by Ty Nant, mobilising staff to undertake direct deliveries to communities and care homes. Many local Councillors and volunteers took it on themselves to collect and distribute water in their communities.

## Recommendations

8. The company needs to work with partners to maximise the distribution of bottled water supply and acknowledge that distribution of bottled water is most effective when delivered through partnerships better geared to meet local needs.
9. Centralised distribution points in such a large rural area with poor road communications are problematic, so need to be supplemented with locations around Village Halls/community hubs which can be managed locally through the Community Council/Councillor.

## **Fulfilling of obligations to vulnerable customers and those on the priority services register.**

The company reports show the support provided to customers registered on the Priority Service Register (PS, with early communication to the P1 customers in advance of the event. 179 P1 customers were identified within the impacted area receiving priority support while there were also 3831 P2 customers registered. Bottled water deliveries were made to over 3000 households. The company review identified a failure to meet expectations of some P2 customers, who did not receive bottled water.

In a large rural area with remote locations, often with poor internet and mobile phone access, central communication messages may be difficult to receive. Individuals at risk in such communities may also not be signed up to the Priority Service Register. A survey of constituents in one ward, conducted post event by a local councillor did highlight an issue with a significant number of responses from PSR customers indicating that they did not receive bottled water.

Local Authorities played a key role in identifying and enabling distribution to vulnerable groups, but there is scope for improvement in the effectiveness of data sharing agreements to cross check those vulnerable residents from different data sources within the impacted area.

The connection across the voluntary sector in the area through agencies such as Citizens Advice, Age Cymru and the network of community hubs. These strong mutual support networks played a key role in the Covid crisis and in many cases have strengthened their capacity to respond to local need.

*“The only element that we need to add to the local response is that Third Sector service provision for vulnerable people is considered, in addition to local authority owned settings.”*

## **Recommendations**

10. The company should review procedures and nature of engagement with customers registered on the PSR, in particular meeting expectations on P2 customers.
11. There should be a review involving public sector the effectiveness use of the data sharing agreements and their use in a crisis to support those in vulnerable circumstances.
12. The Company should liaise with the Voluntary Service Councils to identify role of community hubs, mutual support networks and key voluntary sector agencies.

## **Arrangements for compensation for domestic and business customers.**

The early apology for the disruption and the communication of the compensation package was well received by households and businesses. Some were surprised to receive compensation, and some commented that it would be better spent fixing the problem.

The compensation levels are determined by the data held by the company on the level of supply interruption in each household. There have been issues raised regarding some disputes emerging over final compensation not matching with the level of disruption experienced or differences in the level of compensation received by near neighbours.

## **Recommendations**

13. The company should acknowledge that there can be a potential mismatch in their data and the customer experience of disruption and review in light of the experiences of neighbouring households when cases arise.
14. Customers are as concerned with the long-term fix needed to strengthen local water infrastructure than the short-term compensation and need to be kept in touch as to the action is being taken to address weaknesses identified through this event
15. The opportunity should be taken to increase customer and stakeholder understanding of water supply in the area and actions they can take to ensure future resilience.
16. This report is based largely on responses from intermediaries working with residents and businesses. The company should follow up with research to directly understand the customer experience.

## **In Conclusion**

The nature of this event in a large area of rural Wales put extreme stress on Dŵr Cymru systems, which were not always able to cope with the challenge. This particularly applied to the first 48 hours when the scale of the problem began to unfold. The major issue being the ability of the company to provide accurate information to customers at a hyper local level.

It highlighted the importance of the relationship with Local Authorities and their front-line responsibilities with partners for community resilience. These lessons learnt exercises should be followed up with review meeting at Chief Executive/Leader level.

This report highlights lessons for the company that need to be taken forward from the freeze-thaw event, but the final point should be the overwhelming positive comments regarding the Dŵr Cymru staff involved. This applied both to their work in resolving the issues during the event but also their openness to learning the lessons in the debrief meetings with partners that followed.

The ICG looks forward to receiving responses to the recommendations put forward in the report.

Peter Davies  
Chair Independent Challenge Group

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