

**Report to:** Place Scrutiny Committee

**Date of meeting:** 19 March 2019

**By:** Director of Communities, Economy and Transport (CET)

**Title:** Emergency Planning – Water Companies response to water supply interruption in March 2018

**Purpose:** The report outlines the Water Companies’ response and the Emergency Planning Team’s involvement in the water supply interruption that occurred following the severe weather event in March 2018.

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***RECOMMENDATIONS: The Place Scrutiny Committee is recommended to:***

- 1) Note the Water Companies’ response to the severe weather event contained in their action plans submitted to Ofwat;**
- 2) Note the response to the incident by the Sussex Reliance Forum and the Council’s Emergency Planning Team**

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## **1 Background**

1.1 The Place Scrutiny Committee considered a report on the work of the Council’s Emergency Planning Team at the meeting held on 15 November 2018. At the request of the Chair, consideration of the part of the report that dealt with the water supply interruption incident in March 2018 was deferred until this meeting. This report outlines the background behind the interruption to the water supply, the water supply companies’ and the regulator’s response to the incident as well as the involvement of the Council’s Emergency Planning Team.

## **2 Supporting information**

2.1 In late February and early March 2018 there was a period of severe freezing weather conditions. As a result of this severe weather event many water supply pipes froze and when the rapid thaw followed large parts of the north of the County, and to a lesser extent the east of the County, were left without water supplies. The water supply companies involved were South East Water in the north of the County, and Southern Water in the East of the County around Hastings and Battle. In some cases it took a number of days to restore water supplies, and the availability of emergency supplies of water were limited and widely criticised by affected residents.

2.2 The water industry regulator, Ofwat, launched an investigation into the water companies’ response to the severe weather incident and published a report called “Out in the Cold”. As part of the report recommendations Ofwat required four water companies, including South East Water and Southern Water, to publish an action plan on how they are going to improve their response to severe cold (freeze then thaw) weather events like the ‘Beast from the East’.

2.3 The response and action plan from South East Water can be found on their web site (<http://corporate.southeastwater.co.uk/actionplan>). The response and action plan from Southern Water can be found on the web site ([https://www.southernwater.co.uk/freeze-thaw-response\[southernwater.co.uk\]](https://www.southernwater.co.uk/freeze-thaw-response[southernwater.co.uk])). Ofwat then wrote to each company in November 2018 regarding their action plan and the steps the company should take.

2.4 The most serious water supply interruptions were experienced in the north of the County where South East Water is responsible for water supplies. In their Action Plan, South East Water identify a number of issues in their response to the incident and the factors that led to the severity of the impacts experienced by residents and businesses. These can be summarised as follows:

#### Water Supplies and Burst Pipes

- Water supplies and restoring supplies were affected by the number of water supply 'assets' that were not in use due to planned maintenance, making supplies less resilient and some reservoirs ran empty.
- Although steps were taken to increase water supplies before the incident, the large number of burst pipes due to the rapid freeze thaw meant that demand exceeded supply and supplies were not restored as quickly as customers would have liked. Some residents were without water for more than 48 hours

#### Emergency Water Supplies.

- Supplies of bottled water were limited on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> March (especially at Crowborough) due to the same bottled water supply company being used by a number of water companies, who all called on this resource at the same time.
- Emergency water distribution stations in some locations had to be relocated, due to congestion.
- Emergency water supplies had to be provided to livestock farmers to maintain animal welfare, and non-potable water was made available for toilet flushing, washing etc.

#### Communications.

- Information updates were not localised enough so customers found it hard to get information on what was happening in their village or location.
- Accurate information about emergency supply water deliveries was not available (e.g. water supplies did not arrive at emergency water stations at the advertised time).
- There were also issues with customers not being able to access the call centre.

#### Vulnerable Customers.

- 77 additional customers were added to the Priority Service Register (PSR) during the incident.

2.5 In the Hastings and Battle area, supplied by Southern Water, the disruption of water supplies was not as widespread. However, there were issues shared in common with South East Water such as assets being out of use due to planned maintenance (Weir Wood), and the number of water supply bursts which affected supply resilience. There was also a shortage in the supply of emergency bottled water, and a 'brown out' power cut event which also contributed to supply problems by taking a water treatment facility out of use.

2.6 The Sussex Resilience Forum (SRF) and the Council's Emergency Planning Team were also involved in responding to the severe weather incident as outlined in paragraph 4.4 of the previous report to the Place Scrutiny on 15 November 2018 (see appendix 1).

2.7 In order to address some of the lessons identified following the response to the incident Southern Water have produced a document entitled Emergency Planning Information for Local Resilience Forums and Emergency Responders (see appendix 2) and this includes a section on Local Authority responsibilities.

### **3. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations**

3.1 The Committee is asked to note the Water Companies' response to the incident, including the key actions outlined within the plans submitted to Ofwat, and the response to the incident by the Sussex Reliance Forum and the Council's Emergency Planning Team.

#### **RUPERT CLUBB**

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#### **BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

'Out in the Cold' Ofwat report and information: <https://www.ofwat.gov.uk/out-in-the-cold-next-steps/>

'Beast from the East' Incident Response, South East Water Action Plan, September 2018. <http://corporate.southeastwater.co.uk/actionplan>

Southern Water, Freeze Thaw Action Plan and response to Ofwat, September 2018. <https://www.southernwater.co.uk/freeze-thaw-response> [southernwater.co.uk]