

November 2024

Customers' experiences of sewer flooding

An update report by Ofwat and CCW

Ofwat

CCW

The voice for water consumers
Llais defnyddwyr dŵr

Foreword

This report sets out the experiences of customers who have had internal or external sewer flooding. This is the second time that Ofwat and CCW have come together to commission research into the experience of customers in this situation.

Our 2022 research found few positive examples in the services wastewater companies provided. Communications were limited and support was often non-existent. This led to high anxiety and frustration among customers, who told us about not being able to sleep at night and not being able to use parts of their property for extended periods of time. Ofwat and CCW called on wastewater companies to improve their service in this area. CCW worked with all companies to improve support measures and standards of service (such as clean up services, quicker call out times and case workers).

This latest research finds some improvements. Overall, there were more positive comments about company communications, and internal clean up services have been introduced. It finds that companies appear to be fairly quick at fixing those problems that seem straightforward.

However, the findings also show that much more is needed if all customers are to receive adequate support and swift resolutions when sewer flooding takes place.

- Companies need to ensure that their communications with customers are consistent, empathetic and transparent.
- When providing support such as a clean up service, companies need to be prompt, efficient and thorough.
- When providing the financial payments that fall under the Guaranteed Standards Scheme – or other payments – companies should do so quickly and fully, with an explanation to customers about what the payment represents.
- Most importantly for customers, companies need to do more to fix the problems that cause the sewer flooding in people's homes and gardens.

Those who experience multiple incidents of flooding feel they are left behind and forgotten. They share their experiences of emotional stress, sleepless nights, worries about health impacts from exposure to sewage (particularly for those with children), and financial consequences that include not being able to sell their homes, losing thousands of pounds, and an increase in insurance premiums that they cannot afford.

This report calls on companies to do more for this left behind group and sets out the actions that Ofwat and CCW will take. Customers should not wait many years for the problems causing sewer flooding to be fixed.

Mike Keil
Chief Executive, CCW

David Black
Chief Executive, Ofwat

Introduction

This report sets out the experiences of people who have had sewer flooding inside or outside their homes. The findings are taken from research commissioned jointly by Ofwat and CCW and conducted by the research agency Thinks Insight.

The purpose of the research was to explore the variety of experiences faced by household customers affected by sewer flooding and their views on the services provided by wastewater companies. It was also to identify good and bad practice and to understand how this has changed.

Sixty-one people took part in this qualitative research, with some participating in more than one stage. The fieldwork for the research took place between 26 April and 16 August 2024 – with a break in June due to the General Election campaign. It included:

- one to one interviews with 50 participants;
- workshops with 24 participants; and
- a task activity with 11 participants.

Participants were recruited to ensure a range of experiences and customers were included in the research. This included a mix of:

- internal and external sewer flooding;
- single and multiple incidences;
- severity, ranging from low to very high severity;
- locations – with recruitment across ten wastewater companies in England and Wales; and
- socio-demographics – including age, gender, ethnicity, inclusion on a priority services register.

More information on the research approach is set out in the appendix at the end of this report.

This report sets out key findings from the research. It looks at:

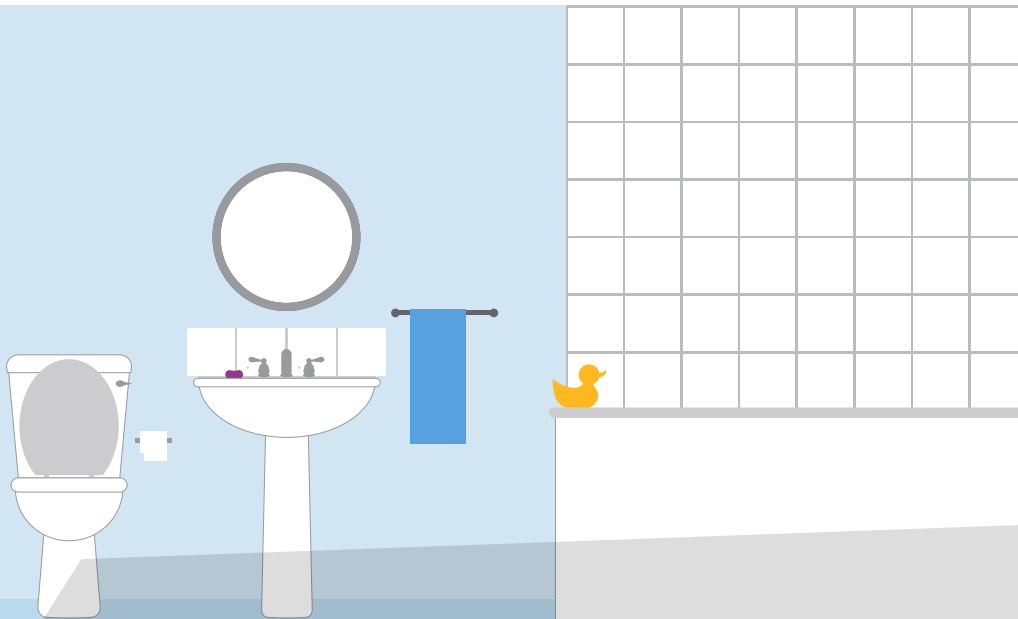
- the experience of sewer flooding;
- communication;
- support;
- financial support;
- resolution;
- actions for wastewater companies; and
- next steps for Ofwat and CCW.

Experience of sewer flooding

Sewer flooding incidents are often highly distressing for customers. Low severity incidents can cause inconvenience and stress. High severity incidents, particularly when repeated, can have a significant impact on people. A high severity event may include ongoing and recurring internal or external sewer flooding that leaves extensive damage to homes, health problems, long term emotional distress and financial consequences.

Personal circumstances such as having children, somebody in the household having a physical or mental disability or health condition, financial vulnerability or not having a close network of friends or family can serve to significantly exacerbate the distress caused by sewer flooding.

In this research, there were a high proportion of participants who experienced multiple incidents of sewer flooding. Their concerns were even more pronounced than in our earlier research.



“

In the grand scheme, it's caused a hell of a lot of anxiety; I've had complete breakdowns. It's destroyed me as a person... My entire life has been destroyed – you just watch the water come in slowly and can't do anything”

– Multiple incidents, internal, high severity

I have three small kids. We had other people's faeces floating around. Trying to explain to two SEN children why they can't touch their toys that they've been given by mummy and daddy or as a gift is extremely hard. Once the water is gone they just don't understand. It was very distressing”

– Multiple incidents, internal, high severity

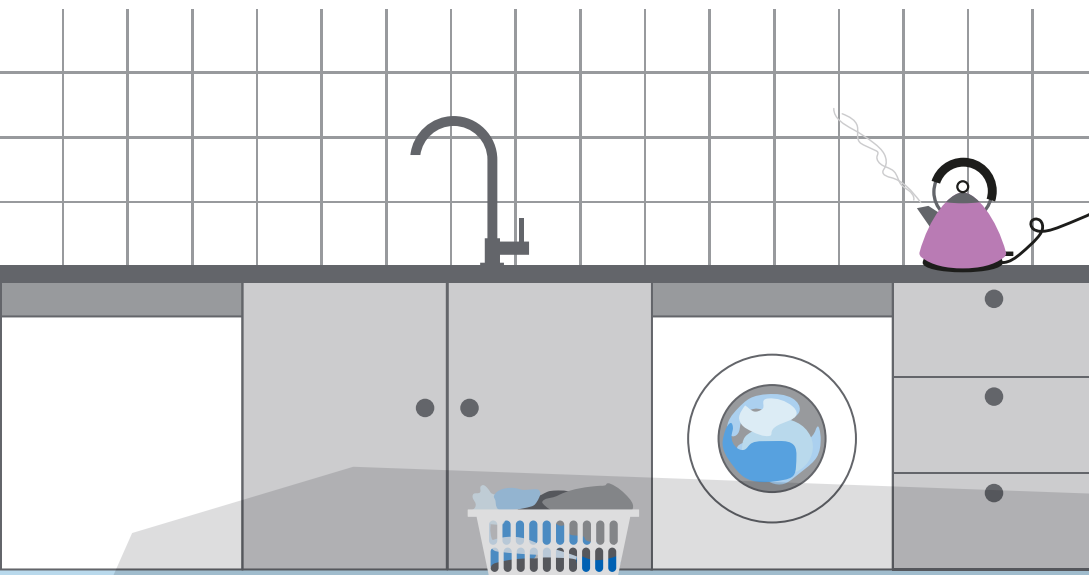
We panic every time it rains. You will sit up all night just in case. We have a camera facing the bath and an alarm – it can come at any time”

– Multiple incidents, internal, high severity

The experience of sewer flooding is defined not only by the flooding itself, but by the response of the wastewater company.

The research found a mix of responses. Some customers reported quick, considerate and helpful actions from their wastewater company. When this happened, it made a significant difference to the customer during a stressful experience. The research also heard about some improvements over the last few years.

However, the more positive experiences tended to be limited to those who had one-off flooding incidents with clear and easy to fix problems. Those facing the most impactful or multiple incidents were often the worst served by their wastewater company and there was a feeling that they were left behind. This group were a majority of participants in the research.



“

[They] exceeded my expectations... They responded quickly, came quickly, cleared the drain... They were very considerate, helpful and professional”

– Single incident, external, medium severity

There seems to be a new strategy, since perhaps 2023 certainly, it's quite different. There's a customer relations team asking how the experience has been, it's a lot more proactive”

– Multiple incidents, internal, high severity

It wasn't the incident itself, it was how it was handled that was so upsetting... I was signed off for two weeks with stress. I'm not somebody who struggles with their mental health; I've never had that”

– Single incident, internal, very high severity

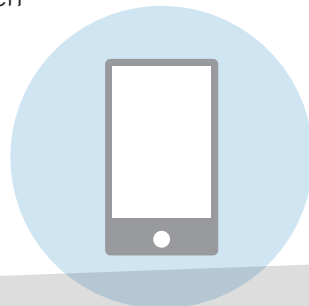
Communication

Participants reported mixed experiences when communicating with their wastewater companies. They were generally positive about their initial interactions – this is often the most positive part of their journey. Many reported they could get in touch with their company easily and customer service agents were professional and empathetic when they reported a problem. There were also some signs of wider improvements, with more participants assigned case numbers and participants less likely to describe interactions as insensitive.

However, participants raised a number of issues related to company communications:

- A lack of proactive updates – many said they had to continuously chase their wastewater company for a response.
- Poorly co-ordinated process – examples were shared of companies not linking customer information to case numbers, meaning participants had to repeat information each time they spoke to someone.
- No notice before visits – engineers turning up while participants were out, resulting in reschedules and delays.
- Lack of transparency – some felt that companies were withholding information from them regarding the cause of the problem or the progress towards a resolution.

Participants were often confused about how wastewater companies were meant to respond to sewer flooding and some of this confusion may be attributed to them having been given partial or misleading information about their rights or company responsibilities.



“

We were assigned a lovely lady who was so caring and ‘on things’. We contacted her a lot, especially after the second flooding... She put our minds at rest”

– Multiple incidents, internal, very high severity

I had a lot of back and forth, lots of disinformation, where correspondence doesn’t match what happened on the day”

– Single incident, internal, very high severity

Every time I called, and I referred to a previous conversation... There was always a new case ID, I always spoke to someone different”

– Multiple incidents, internal, very high severity

It’s more me chasing them. That’s one thing I’ve really noticed. If they give me a date, I’d expect them to give me a courtesy call or a text... but there’s just nothing”

– Multiple incidents, external, very high severity

Transparency is the main thing, both during the event and after the event”

– Single incident, external, medium severity

They want you to be quiet and go away, that’s the feeling that you get”

– Multiple incidents, external, medium severity

Support

There are various ways that wastewater companies can support customers when sewer flooding occurs. Most companies have committed to delivering an internal and external clean-up service within a short period of time. Companies may also extend support to short term accommodation costs for those who are financially vulnerable when it is not safe for them to stay in their homes.

Companies have made increased commitments in this area over the last few years. However, participants felt the support provided when things go wrong is significantly lacking.

Participants reported inadequate clean-up services that left behind sewage waste that participants themselves then had to clean up. For some customers, no clean-up was offered. For others, it was too long to wait and they ended up cleaning the sewage themselves.

Participants also felt that the support wasn't tailored for their needs – they wanted companies to consider individual circumstances such as specific vulnerabilities, financial situation and whether they can call upon family and friends to help.

Overall, while some participants reported satisfaction with the support on offer, the majority were dissatisfied at the poor quality of support they received.



“

[The clean-up team] were there for about 10 minutes. I could still smell it, so I went behind [the furniture] myself and was just pulling out lumps and lumps of poo. I can't believe after two deep cleans I am pulling out lumps of poo”

– Single incident, internal, very high severity

My wife has severe mental health issues – she got down on her hands and knees and cleared it up before they got there, and as a result they said it was a private issue. Even though we have lots of photos and videos, the area manager said under no circumstances will they accept liability”

– Multiple incidents, internal, very high severity

They definitely did not offer a clean-up service. And haven't throughout the entire process... When I kept saying things like, 'there's mould coming through,' they said you should clean that up as if they weren't responsible for any of it”

– Single incident, internal, high severity

Financial support

The Guaranteed Standard Scheme sets out payments that should be provided by wastewater companies to customers who experience internal or external sewer flooding.

The research found that many participants reported receiving some kind of payment, often in the form of a refund on their bills. For some, this was applied automatically, others reported needing to apply or put pressure on their company to receive it.

However, this payment, which is often termed a 'goodwill gesture' is seen by some participants as a way to keep them quiet. The payments do not cover their costs: they may often be a few hundred pounds, whereas for many participants the costs ran into thousands or even tens of thousands of pounds.

The longer term financial implications can be particularly great for those who experience multiple incidents. For these participants, the consequences go beyond replacing furniture and immediate repairs. They include being unable to afford the increase in home insurance, properties losing significant value, and the fear or reality of being unable to sell their homes.



“

[My wastewater company] said they would give me £150 as that was my annual sewer charge. I was getting quotes for £4,000 to 5,000 to get the damage fixed from the flooding – furniture, plumbing etc. It felt so unfair as none of it was my fault”

– Single incident, internal, high severity

So far it's cost us £11,000, and that's just on replacing belongings, not even doing work. The work as well is about £20,000”

– Multiple incidents, internal, high severity

I didn't have personal contents insurance so I'm screwed, like I don't have a bed frame, I have loads of out of pocket expenses. I'm hoping down the line I can claim against them legally”

– Single incident, internal, high severity

They gave me... around £150 off the water bill for the inconvenience. I had flies everywhere, it was disgusting. It's like they're laughing at you when they offer that. It's insulting”

– Multiple incidents, internal, high severity

We have now lost our home insurance due to the number of claims that we have made for flooding damage (we lost the ability to claim accidental damage the year before for the same reason) yet we are STILL being flooded”

– Multiple incidents, internal, very high severity

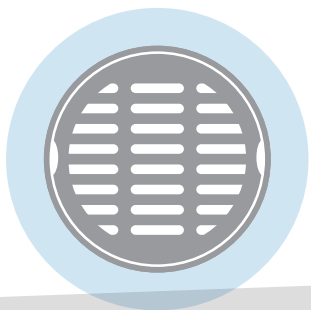
Resolution

When an incident takes place, the communication and support provided by a company shape the customer experience. But the biggest priority from the customer perspective is resolution. By this, they mean the problem is fixed fully and the first time, so they do not need to worry about it again. A lot of the anxiety and problems experienced by those who see themselves as left behind are a direct consequence of a lack of resolution.

There can be several reasons, as well as no apparent reason, why a sewer flooding problem is not resolved. When a resolution is not immediately forthcoming, customers can find themselves having to dedicate a lot of time and often expense to persuade the company to take action. Some liken this to a full-time job because of the perseverance that is needed.

Some participants reported that the sewer flooding they experienced was not prioritised or was seen as too expensive to fix. Some of these participants were left in the dark about the cause of the problem, what the company plans to do, if anything, and any timetable for this. This may be despite many attempts from the customer to find out what was going on.

Sometimes a company tries to reduce the risk of a repeat incident rather than resolving the cause of the problem. For a few, there is also the complexity of more than one company or agency being involved and differing views on who is responsible.



“

I've chased them over months, it makes me look crazy or like you're stalking them... Eventually I gave up. I thought 'I won't interact with these people anymore'”

– Multiple incidents, internal, high severity

I don't think they've done enough. They put cameras down and all that kind of stuff, but I don't think they've done a proper thorough job on it to actually really address the issue”

– Multiple incidents, external, very high severity

They gave me something like £67. I don't want that. I just want the problem to be solved”

– Multiple incidents, external, medium severity

I had faith they would fix it. It's their network, they have full responsibility for resolving the issue and putting things right... but no chance”

– Multiple incidents, internal, high severity

Actions

Wastewater companies need to do more to ensure that all customers who experience sewer flooding receive good service and support.

Communication and transparency

There have been some improvements in relation to communication – but these need to be consistent. Communication needs to be empathetic, proactive and accurate.

- Provide comprehensive and clear information on what support to expect from the company and what a customer can do if the support is not provided.
- Be proactive so that customers are updated regularly.
- Be transparent so that customers receive full and up to date records relating to the incident and are not left with the feeling that information is being withheld.
- Provide information in one place so there is a communication trail, as well as a named or single point of contact.

Support

Companies have begun to provide more support to those who experience sewer flooding – for example, internal clean up services. However, it is vital that this support meets the purpose that it's intended for. A clean up service that does not properly and quickly clean up the sewage can cause a customer further problems.

- Respond quickly to incidents, particularly when sewage is in people's homes.
- Provide high quality services and clean up. This means using appropriate equipment and allocating sufficient time.
- Consider health risks and vulnerabilities and then tailor support. For example, customers should not be left living in homes covered with sewage because they cannot afford to stay elsewhere.

Financial payment

Companies are required to provide a financial payment to those who qualify under the Guaranteed Standard Scheme.

- Companies should provide customers with clear, upfront and direct information about what payments they are entitled to, and confirm when these payments are made.
- Companies should check that they are making these payments to all who are entitled. Companies should assess the cases of those who experience multiple flooding to ensure appropriate payments have been made for each incident.

Resolution

Companies need to do more to help those trapped in the cycle of multiple sewer flooding incidents. These are the left behind customers.

- Companies should review at executive level the cases of those experiencing multiple incidents.
- Companies should put in place more proactive support and maintain preventative measures to help customers experiencing multiple incidents.
- Companies should put time limits in place for resolving sewer flooding incidents – so that no customer is left experiencing this for years or even decades.

Next steps

In 2022, Ofwat and CCW outlined actions that wastewater companies needed to take to improve their response to sewer flooding incidents. This report shows that some progress has been made towards this. Participants reported improved communication at the outset, clean up services were introduced in part, and more participants received some form of financial payment. However, the report also shows that the service many customers receive is severely lacking. More needs to be done to ensure that all customers who experience sewer flooding are supported and that problems are resolved.

Ofwat

The research findings show that improvements need to be made with regard to how wastewater companies manage sewer flooding incidents. To drive improvements, in 2025 Ofwat will assess companies' compliance with licence condition G, which sets out principles of customer care, with respect to sewer flooding. Ofwat will also update its published guidance to enforcement against sewer flooding.

We have introduced a performance commitment on external sewer flooding for the next period (2025-30), to sit alongside an existing performance commitment on internal sewer flooding. This means companies will be expected to meet targets for external as well as internal flooding.

We will continue to use our annual [water company performance report](#) and other tools to showcase good and poor performers. Companies who fall under our enhanced monitoring process will be required to publish a service commitment plan, outlining when and how customers will receive the service they expect.

CCW

This research has shown that CCW's 'End Sewer Flooding Misery' Campaign is not over. We have a clear role to make sure that victims voices are being heard by companies. We are working with Ofwat and Defra to increase the minimum payments victims receive under the Guaranteed Standards Scheme. That is a minimum.

We will use this research to ensure companies keep their promises to make improvements. We will speak to each company at a local level, we will get companies to share best practice so they can be clear on what is working and what needs to further improve.

The full research findings can be read in the Thinks Insight report, which can be found on Ofwat and CCW's websites

Appendix – research sample

Sixty-one participants took part in qualitative research conducted by the agency Thinks Insight. Qualitative research shows the type and range of experiences that people may have – but findings cannot be quantified due to the size of the sample and the design of the research.

It may be the case that people who have had poorer experiences are more likely to respond to a request to take part in research. We sought to mitigate that risk in two ways. We set a range of criteria for participation in the research – to ensure a mix of, for example, types of incidents. We also offered participants a financial incentive to take part in the research. Financial incentives are typically used in recruitment for qualitative research and are recognised as an effective way of encouraging participation.

Participants in the research were recruited from contact data collected from ten wastewater companies. The research sought to include people who had a fairly recent experience of sewer flooding, but with enough time elapsed to allow for a full response by companies. The interviews took place with people who had sewer flooding between January 2023 and March 2024.

The report by Thinks Insight sets out the spread of participants across a range of factors and socio-demographics. This includes the spread across companies, by severity, whether flooding was internal or external, whether flooding was one-off or multiple.

Sewer flooding: roles and responsibilities

A wide range of bodies are responsible for flooding, as set out by the national flood forum, in [Who's responsible for what – National Flood Forum](#).

Wastewater companies are responsible for the public sewers. These are usually in roads or public open spaces, but may run through private gardens.

The drains and any private sewers which carry household waste are normally the householder's (or the landlord's) responsibility. This applies up to the point they connect with the public sewers. This is usually at the boundary of the property.

Local authorities function as landlords for council houses and are responsible for highways drainage, including gullies, on the roads they maintain.

In England, the Highways Agency is responsible for highways drainage on the trunk roads and motorways they maintain.

Sewer flooding: number of incidents

In 2023–24, wastewater companies recorded almost 6,000 incidents of internal sewer flooding (flooding which enters a building or passes below a suspended floor) and approximately 51,700 incidents of external sewer flooding (within the curtilage of a building normally used for residential, public, community and business purposes).

Guaranteed standards scheme

The guaranteed standards scheme sets out the following for sewer flooding:

Flooding from sewers – internal flooding

If effluent enters a customer's building from a sewerage company's asset (such as a sewer or lateral drain), the company must make an automatic GSS payment of the sum equal to the customer's annual sewerage charge up to a maximum of £1,000. If the amount the company is required to pay is less than £150, the company must pay the customer £150. This payment must be made for each incident.

There are exceptions to the requirement to make a payment if effluent enters a customer's building. These are if:

- the entry of the effluent was caused by:
 - exceptional weather conditions;
 - industrial action by the company's employees;
 - the actions of the customer;
 - a defect, inadequacy or blockage in the customer's drains or sewers; or
- it is impractical for the company to have identified the particular customer as being affected and the customer has not made a claim within three months of the effluent entering the customer's building.

Flooding from sewers – external flooding

If effluent enters a customer's land or property (including outbuildings) from a sewerage company's asset (such as a sewer or lateral drain), the company must make a GSS payment of a sum equal to 50% of the customer's annual sewerage charge up to a maximum of £500. The customer must claim the payment from the company within three months of the incident.

If the amount the company is required to make is less than £75, the company must pay the customer £75. This payment must be made for each incident.

There are exceptions to the requirement to make a payment if effluent enters a customer's land or property. These are if:

- the entry of the effluent was caused by:
 - exceptional weather conditions;
 - industrial action by the company's employees;
 - the actions of the customer;
 - a defect, inadequacy or blockage in the customer's drains or sewers;
- the company has made a payment to the same customer in respect of the same incident for internal sewer flooding; or
- the customer was not materially affected by the incident.

In deciding whether a customer has been materially affected by the incident companies must take into account:

- what parts of the customer's land or property the effluent entered;
- the duration of the flooding;
- whether the flooding restricted access to the land or property;
- whether the flooding restricted the use of the land or property; and
- any other relevant considerations of which the company is aware.

The Government is currently consulting on changes to the Guaranteed Standards Scheme.

**Ofwat (The Water Services Regulation Authority)
is a non-ministerial government department.
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