



## **Practical assistance guidelines**

### **Dealing with customers who have been affected by sewer flooding – practical assistance**

#### **1. Customers should be able to contact their sewerage company easily when a sewer flooding incident occurs.**

When a customer reports a sewer flooding incident to their sewerage company, they expect the company to understand the reason for their call immediately, and for the staff at the company to deal with them politely and quickly. Customers should be able to easily find the relevant telephone number within the company's literature or on its website.

##### **1.1 Clearly advertised telephone line(s) for customers who have been affected by sewer flooding and/or those known to be at risk of flooding.**

Some companies have a dedicated telephone number for customers to call if they have been flooded with sewage. This ensures that the staff responding to the call have been specially trained to deal with such customers and can deal with the call effectively. Companies should publish the relevant telephone number on its literature and on its website to allow customers to easily find it when needed.

As good practice, a dedicated telephone line is ideal. A general emergency line is acceptable, and all staff dealing with calls reporting sewer flooding should be aware of sewer flooding issues to be able to deal with the customer's call effectively.

At times when widespread flooding occurs (such as, in large parts of the company area rather than localised flooding), the company should make every effort to answer calls quickly and efficiently. If there are a number of incidents, for example during exceptional weather, customers may have difficulty in contacting the company. In such circumstances, companies should make every effort to provide the necessary resources to answer customer calls. Companies may also find it helpful to employ a message manager system to provide the initial reassurance to customers that the company is aware of the incident(s), is

taking action to deal with the problem, and will answer their calls as quickly as possible.

## 1.2 Staff specifically trained to deal with customers who have been flooded.

Staff who deal with customers who have been flooded should receive adequate training to allow them to handle the calls. Staff should understand and be able to communicate company policies to inform customers:

- how quickly they can expect a visit from a company representative or contractor. The company needs to make it clear to customers that visits during periods of widespread sewer flooding may be difficult and take longer than normal. Companies may prioritise internal sewer flooding incidents before external sewer flooding. However, companies should make every effort to provide the necessary resources to visit customer properties within normal company timescales;
- what the representative will do to arrange the clean-up of the affected area;
- whether the customer should document any damage to property;
- whether the company will provide any additional assistance to customers with special needs such as visual impairment or mobility problems; and
- what steps the company will take next.

If the initial call from the customer was on a general telephone number, the current good practice is for that customer to then be given a named contact and a direct telephone number for them. Where calls are made to a dedicated sewer flooding telephone number, the customer should still be given a named contact and, where possible, a direct telephone number for the named contact. This allows the customer to have a contact for any queries or further problems they may have. At the least, companies should keep in regular contact with the customer until the sewer flooding has been cleared. Where possible, the company should inform the customer when they can expect to receive the next contact from the company.

## 1.3 Customers can expect their company to provide adequate advice about contacting insurers.

When a customer calls to report a sewer flooding incident, staff should be in a position to offer advice about contacting insurers. They should be able to:

- advise customers to contact their insurers as soon as possible;
- explain the general interaction between the water company and the insurance company, and the general process including a timeframe if appropriate; and

- if the customer is uninsured, staff should be trained on company policy for dealing with this and explain that to the customer.

## **2. Customers should expect their sewerage company to visit their property promptly when a sewer flooding incident occurs.**

All companies will visit customers who have been affected by sewer flooding. This may not always be a company representative, as some companies use contractors to clean up after a sewer flooding incident. Companies should make it clear to customers the name of the contracting organisation who will visit to avoid any uncertainty for the customer. The company needs to make it clear to customers that visits during periods of widespread sewer flooding may be difficult or take longer than normal. Companies may prioritise internal sewer flooding incidents before external sewer flooding. However, companies should make every effort to provide the necessary resources to visit customer properties within normal company timescales.

- 2.1 The company should arrange a convenient time with the customer for its representative's initial visit.
- 2.2 The visit should occur within a given timescale. The customer will have been informed of this when they initially called to report the incident. Current best practice is to visit a customer within two hours of the customer reporting a sewer flooding incident, but this may differ where there has been widespread sewer flooding.
- 2.3 The company representative attending the property should give the customer details of what can be done to help them to clean up. Customers should be given the option to clean up themselves if they would prefer to do so.
- 2.4 The company representative should give the customer details of any additional services that will be provided to the customer if they have informed the company of any special needs they may have.
- 2.5 The company should then provide any clean-up assistance necessary depending on the nature of the incident, the involvement of insurers and the customer's wishes for both internal and external incidents. This may include:
  - pumping out sewage from basements or under floor areas;
  - hosing down the affected area;
  - cleaning floors and contaminated areas with disinfectant; or

- providing advice to the customer on what they should do if they choose to clean up themselves.

Companies should make clear to customers what reinstatement is provided to customers following clean up of external sewer flooding (such as replacing turf in a garden).

If further investigation is needed, the company should provide details of what this will involve (such as a survey of the sewer or a questionnaire for the customer to complete).

2.6 At the time of visit, the company representative should:

- provide a direct telephone number for staff dealing with the incident;
- confirm what investigations will be made into the cause and the timescales for completion;
- provide the customer with information about who will help with the clean up and the timescales for completing this, or offer advice to the customer on cleaning up the area themselves;
- advise the customer if the company is going to use a contractor and clearly explain their role; and
- inform the customer about GSS payment procedures.

2.7 If it is still unclear who is responsible for the sewer flooding incident, the company should still visit in order to confirm responsibility and follow up actions.

- If sewer flooding is not the company's responsibility, the company should, where possible, provide the customer with advice on the next steps they should take (such as contacting the local authority). The company may notify the relevant third party in the first instance. Where the company intends to contact a third party on the customer's behalf, the company must have the customer's agreement.

### **3. Companies should provide their customers with any necessary information on how to deal with their property and the associated health risks during and after clean up.**

When the clean-up process is under way, the company should keep the customer informed about how long it will take and give advice about when the area affected is safe to use again.

- 3.1 The company should give the customer relevant and up-to-date literature about how the affected area should be treated and when the customer can re-use the area.
  - 3.2 The company should provide the customer with relevant and up-to-date literature on sewer flooding, including information about blockages if this was the cause of the sewer flooding.
  - 3.3 The company should provide information about blockages to the neighbourhood where the incident occurred, if this was the cause of the sewer flooding.
  - 3.4 The customer should be provided with a contact name and number so that they can call the company or the contractors in the event of any problems they have during the clean up.
  - 3.5 Customers should be advised that independent advice is also available from their local environmental health department.
  - 3.6 The company should stay in close contact with the customer throughout the clean-up process.
  - 3.7 The company should provide the customer with any other relevant and up-to-date information on actions the customer could take to prevent any further sewer flooding from occurring.
- 4. Companies should communicate with customers regarding investigations into the cause of sewer flooding and solutions such as capital schemes and/or mitigation measures if appropriate for their property.**

Following a sewer flooding incident, companies should inform customers of the actions they will take to investigate and determine the cause of sewer flooding and to provide a permanent solution to the problem, if appropriate.

- 4.1 Companies should also communicate with customers regarding the investigations into the cause of sewer flooding.

Companies should explain that the causes of sewer flooding, other than blockages, are not easily determined without lengthy investigations, particularly where there are no previous records of sewer flooding at the property. Customers should receive a clear explanation of what investigations are planned to establish the cause and be given realistic timescales for this work.

- 4.2 Where appropriate, companies should explain the possibility of mitigation measures being installed at a customer's property to reduce the risk or effect of sewer flooding.

Any relevant literature should be left with the customer, and the company should explain fully that mitigation measures are not permanent solutions, that they are optional and provided free of charge. All of the available options for mitigation measures (such as fitting non-return valves, air-brick covers, uPVC doors, purpose-built gates to act as flood barriers and bolting down sewer pipe inspection covers) should be included where appropriate.

- 4.3 Where possible, companies should provide advance warning to customer of the risk of repeated sewer flooding events.
- 4.4 If the company is due to implement a work programme that will solve the problem at the customer's property, the company should explain this to the customer as soon as it is appropriate to do so.

The company should explain how schemes are prioritised and the practical aspects of the work programme – what it will entail, how long it will take, any disruption to the customer, and how it will solve the sewer flooding problem. If possible, the company should give the customer a realistic timescale for the work programme to be completed. The company should contact the customer regularly to update them on the progress towards the completion of a capital scheme.

## Financial guidelines

### Dealing with customers who have been affected by sewer flooding – financial assistance and advice

**1. Every year, companies must inform customers of their entitlement under GSS Regulations.**

GSS Regulation 17 states that companies must inform all of its customers at least annually of their entitlement to GSS payments under the GSS Regulations. Good practice is that this also includes a customer's entitlement under enhanced GSS and customer charter scheme. This should be provided on bills or accompanying leaflets so customer can see what they are entitled to at a glance.

**2. Companies must provide customers with a GSS payment within 20 working days from the date of the internal sewer flooding incident.**

GSS Regulation 11 states that GSS payments must automatically be made to any customer who has been affected by internal sewer flooding. This payment must be made within 20 days of the sewer flooding incident. The company should provide details to the customer of the GSS payments to which they are entitled. It should also inform the customer that it will make a payment within 20 working days from the date of the sewer flooding incident occurring. If the payment is made after this date, the customer is entitled to a further payment of £20.

**3. Companies must provide customers with a payment of GSS within 20 working days from the date a customer claims a GSS payment for external sewer flooding.**

GSS Regulation 12 states that the customer must claim GSS payments for external sewer flooding within three months of the incident. The customer must also demonstrate they have been materially affected by the external sewer flooding. The company must provide the payment within 20 working days of the customer making a written claim for payment. If the payment is made after this date, the customer is entitled to a further payment of £20.

**4. Companies should apply their compensation arrangements to all customers and consider all claims for compensation.**

Companies should consider the individual circumstances affecting customers when deciding how to handle claims for compensation. In general, they should:

- consider all claims made and respond to all customers who have made a claim;
- examine the individual circumstances of a claim and the impact it has had on the customer;
- inform the customer of entitlements under the GSS Regulations plus the additional support offered by the company; and
- consider claims for compensation in a timely manner and keep the customer informed of decisions.

**5. Companies should have a policy in place for dealing with customers who are uninsured as a result of previous sewer flooding.**

Most customers will have insurance in place to cover losses due to sewer flooding. However, there may be some customers who are uninsured because either:

- they cannot afford insurance because of previous sewer flooding incidents which have made premiums or excesses too expensive; or
- they have been refused insurance as a direct result of their sewer flooding risk.

Companies should try to help this group of customers and make sure that they are not left out of pocket as a result of a sewer flooding incident. We expect this to be a very small number of customers and does not necessarily include uninsured customers who have chosen not to take out insurance for any reason other than as a result of sewer flooding.

Companies should inform customers of any hardship funds operated by the company that could provide assistance to the customer.