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Dear Carys

**Review of freeze/thaw incidents – request for further communications information**

This letter and the attached data sheet provide our response to your request (of 24 April 2018) for further information on how we proactively engaged with our customers before, during and after the freeze/thaw period. We fully recognise the importance of communications and keeping customers informed, and as we outlined our submission on April 6, our communication strategy for incidents puts emphasis on being preventative before, and then proactive during an incident, with a speedy follow-up and apology, and with compensation paid quickly afterwards.

Over the last two years we have made a huge step change in the effectiveness of our communications during incidents. We have placed significant focus on it as new channels such as social media have changed the communication landscape and as customer expectations have changed in parallel. We now have well-practiced and well-documented communications protocols and procedures for incidents as an integrated part of our Strategic Incident Management Response Plan (SIMRP). Our Communications, Customer Contact and Social Media teams take part in several mock communication incident exercises a year, as well as some additional companywide ones, so that we can practice and refine our response. These are either conducted and assessed, or supported by an independent media agency. The improvements have been recognised by several of our stakeholders including the Drinking Water Inspectorate and CCWater, but we know there is always more we can do.

Our full communications response was outlined in Section D of our submission on April 6, and we have provided further information below to explain and supplement this latest data table. We have used our best endeavours to complete the Ofwat data table in full for the 4 week period, but there are some data lines where we have had to prioritise the information solely for the incident window due to the deadline and the time needed to analyse the data.

## **Proactive communications before the freeze/thaw event**

As we detailed in our April 6 submission, there were two bursts of communications before the incident: first, a campaign to ask customers to prepare their homes for the cold weather on 28 February 2018, and second, a press release to ask them to report leaks and to remind them how to do so on 4 March 2018. These communications involved: proactive press releases; website updates and 'how to' videos; social media updates; and media interviews.

## **Communications during the freeze/thaw event**

During the freeze/thaw event, we mobilised our full communications plan and operated a 24/7 response throughout. This involved two core strands of activity:

- i) We bolstered our contact centre and social media teams to respond to the increase in customer queries via calls into our contact centre, web chat conversations, and social media.
- ii) We issued lots of proactive communications through a wide variety of channels to ensure that customers were kept updated. This included direct channels and mass media channels.

The following describes how we used different communications channels to engage with residential customers, before summarising our communication with vulnerable customers, retailers and business customers.

### ***Email***

While your data table requests information on email volumes, this is not one of our preferred channels of proactive communication with residential customers during incidents. Our preferred channels are digital channels such as SMS, voicemail pushes and social media updates because we have found that these are a more effective way of issuing timely alerts to residential customers, while still offering all the key information they need. We do, however, respond to emails from our customers, and email is therefore still an important channel in terms of our response capabilities for residential customers. We have therefore included the number of inbound emails we received during the incident.

We also use emails as a means of communicating with retailers, and with a range of different stakeholders but this is not reflected in the table. This includes our regulators, and MPs. Over 195 emails were sent to our key stakeholders during the event. We have expressed our thanks to many MPs who were very helpful during the incident in terms of sharing news with their constituents.

### ***SMS, phone and automatic voicemail***

We found SMS and voicemail updates to be a highly effective means of engaging with a large number of our customers in a targeted manner. We issued regular area specific SMS text and voicemail updates to customers' phones in the affected areas. During the incident, 104 different messages were sent out across 852,000 SMS or voicemails.

## ***Social media***

We always provide a 24/7 social media response and during this incident we significantly increased our regular team to provide an additional 527 man-hours of support. This meant we were able to respond to every customer Tweet that required a response (1,463 responses out of 1,509 tweets received).

We also proactively issued 45 unique Twitter or Facebook updates (45 on Twitter and 32 on Facebook) helping to generate c1.9m impressions on Twitter and reach circa 277,000 people on Facebook. Our social media reach was enhanced by our use of paid for social media 'boosting' during the event which resulted in posts appearing on all users' feeds in the affected areas and not just those following or searching for Severn Trent.

Our analysis of social media sentiment shows that 80% of posts we received from customers were either positive or neutral in tone.

## ***Our website***

We issued 91 separate website updates and had 1.6 million hits on our site.

## ***Engagement with the media***

Our proactive work with the media also helped to generate a lot of regular updates through mass channels on TV, radio and the local media – which we recognise as a particularly important channel to ensure that customers who are not online are also kept updated. We provided 110 media updates during the incident and conducted 17 TV and radio interviews which helped to generate over 700 TV, radio and press updates for customers.

## ***Engagement at bottled water stations***

We had Communication team members or senior managers at every bottled water station so that we could not only distribute water, but we could also use the stations as a community information hub as well. We set up internal communication channels that meant we could provide timely updates to the teams at the water stations, and so that we could also triage customer queries from our water stations back into our incident communications team.

## ***Proactive communication with vulnerable customers***

In line with our SIMRP, we have plans in place to engage with and support our vulnerable customers and our sensitive non-household customers. During the event, we proactively called our Priority Service Register customers in the impacted areas to notify them and let them know that bottled water supplies were on their way to their doorsteps. Supplies were mobilised quickly and doorstep deliveries started within four hours. We also liaised directly with hospitals, care homes, prisons, schools and farmers in the affected areas to offer a range of alternative supplies if they needed them.

## ***Proactive communication with retailers and business customers***

We communicated with retailers through posting some updates on our Retailer portal, and contacting a number of them directly by phone and email. We proactively contacted a small number of large industrial users of water, including Jaguar Land Rover (JLR) and Cadburys, in anticipation of the need for supply interruption. This engagement enabled a managed suspension of production with 6 businesses for a short period to enable us to conserve water, which was then utilised to augment supplies within the network. It helped to stabilise the system at a critical point. We regularly liaised directly by phone and email with these customers including before turning off supplies and then again as we turned them back on so that they could manage their business needs accordingly. We also proactively contacted their retailers.

## **Proactive communications after the incident**

Our main communications with our customers after (but concerning) the incident have so far been the following:

- a. We issued an apology and thank you to customers after the incident via an update to our website, a press release and proactive social media posts.
- b. We ran adverts in the local media to apologise to customers and thank local partners and the community for their support throughout.
- c. Our CEO, Managing Director of Production and Head of Communications visited impacted customers and farmers to hear about their experiences in the Ashbourne area of Derbyshire.
- d. We moved quickly to announce our compensation arrangements which were well above our GSS payments. We agreed these in advance with CCW.
- e. We have followed up with all the schools we had contact with during the incident to offer them workshops or assemblies with our education team.
- f. We followed up with our vulnerable customers to ensure that they were back on supply and didn't need any further alternative supplies. We are also in the process of following up with any new vulnerable customers who contacted us during the incident to add them to our PSR and discuss our wider vulnerable customer support programmes that might be available to them.

We also issued our customer satisfaction survey 'Pipe-up' to all potentially impacted customers after the incident and 6,644 customers responded. This has provided valuable insight into the extent to and manner in which our customers were affected by the freeze/thaw event, and suggests that the number of our customers that experienced supply interruptions during the freeze/thaw event was likely to be 50-60% lower than the calculated level we included in our 6 April submission.

## **Compensation Communications**

We quickly and proactively announced our compensation arrangements on Tuesday 6 March. These were well above our GSS payments (as set out in Section E of our submission on 6 April) and moved quickly to complete all the payments to customers by 4 April. We also wrote to all of the customers to confirm this.

## Summary

Overall, we were able to issue a huge volume of proactive communications across a very wide range of channels to suit all customer types to try and ensure all customers had a method of being kept updated (whether they were online or not). Our widespread use of proactive channels meant we reached high volumes of customers with regular updates.

We know that there is always more we can do though, and we are always committed to improving. We have already started to look at improving and refining our liaison with retailers and business customers, exploring how we can enhance our approach for farmers and schools, and ensuring that we don't rely too heavily on online and phone-based channels (having found that our most rural customers couldn't always access the internet or phone signal). We have an on-going engagement programme with all our Local Resilience Forums, and we have already had senior managers, including our Chief Executive, meet with local councils, retailers, farmers, customers and businesses to start this process.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "A J Ball" followed by a long horizontal flourish.

**Dr. Tony Ballance**  
**Director, Strategy and Regulation**

