



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Regional Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Winter Readiness: Northern Ireland Water
Briefing

21 November 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Regional Development

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Seán Lynch (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr John Dallat
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr Ross Hussey
Mrs Dolores Kelly
Mr Declan McAleer
Mr Ian McCrea
Mr David McNarry
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

Witnesses:

Mr Trevor Haslett	Northern Ireland Water
Ms Sara Venning	Northern Ireland Water

The Deputy Chairperson: Trevor and Sara, you are both welcome to the Committee. If you make your presentation, we will ask questions afterwards.

Mr Trevor Haslett (Northern Ireland Water): Thank you, Mr Chairman and Committee members. I am here with Sara Venning, our customer services director. We are appreciative of the opportunity to let you know how we are prepared for this winter, what lessons we have learnt, and the improvements that we have made.

On the second slide in our submission, we recap on the freeze/thaw event of two years ago. It was the coldest winter for 100 years, but it was combined with a rapid thaw and the holiday period — a combination that made a perfect storm. That combination may not occur again, but we are prepared in any case. The important thing is that our distribution input went up by 40% initially and peaked at an increase of 70%. There are very few distribution systems that would have been able to cope with that sort of increase in that space of time.

The event caused an increase in demand. As we knew at the time, and as the Utility Regulator's report later confirmed, about 80% of the additional demand came from losses on the private and commercial side. There were significant call volumes, which is another area that Sara will pick up on. Our normal level is 1,000 calls a day. The number of calls peaked on 28 December at 403,000 calls. Notably, those calls came from about 32,000 customers. It was the same customers repeating the calls; they were not all made by separate customers. There was an intense media spotlight. We have significantly improved our website; it has become less corporate and more customer-focused since the incident. We will talk about that later. There was also a major impact on the company's reputation.

Our submission shows you what happened on distribution input. It is important to point out that from about 20 December onwards, there was an increase in flows caused by people running their taps to waste, in the hope that their pipes would not freeze. With the thaw on 27 December, that increased significantly to a peak in distribution input of 850 megalitres per day. Since then, of course, we have looked at the campaign and our own infrastructure. We will cover that later. You will be pleased to know that the current distribution input is about 560 megalitres a day. That is important as it gives us headroom of about 60 megalitres a day on where we were. That extra 60 megalitres could probably have saved quite a number of customers.

What have we done since? Well, we have made improvements to our incidence response. We are much better prepared in key areas, particularly telephony. Our winter readiness campaign is aimed at addressing where 80% of the additional demand and losses came from, namely customers on the commercial side, farms, vacant properties, and so on. For example, considerable damage was caused to student lets in the Belfast area.

We will also raise the awareness of Call to Action, which involves co-operation with many stakeholders. Yesterday, we had a local council briefing in Antrim with all 26 councils at which we went over much the same presentation as today. We appreciate their co-operation.

I will ask Sara take you through the next set of slides and to refer to the call centre and the improvements that we have made.

Ms Sara Venning (Northern Ireland Water): I want to reassure you about some of the improvements that we have made to our call centre, which certainly let us down in the 2010-11 event. We have made great strides. No matter how good a call centre we have and no matter how many phone calls we can answer, we have to have information to pass to customers. Therefore, another part of our plan for improvement was to make sure that we could get information from the field — from the response teams — and make it available through all our forms of communication. As the presentation continues, you will see that we communicate with the citizens of Northern Ireland on a number of fronts and not just through our call centre. The important thing to note is that every channel will receive the same message. One of the first improvements that we made was to make sure that we could get out the message about what is happening on the ground in a timely fashion.

It is no secret that our call centre was overwhelmed in the freeze/thaw event. However, we have since improved its capacity. We have increased the number of lines going into the call centre and have made arrangements for an overflow call centre in Bangor, should demand exceed the extended capacity. We have also invested in voice-recognition technology, and we have practised and drilled our application of that in the months since the freeze/thaw.

A key change that we have made in our call centre is to make it not just about being reactive in answering calls; we have made it much more proactive. Our call centre now makes outbound calls. As we become aware of an event — and we have had some minor events — we set aside a group of people who make phone calls. Some of the people in this room may have been phoned. We phone MLAs, councillors, and customer representatives to update them on events that we know to be happening. We also got feedback from people who said that they wanted help or information but could just not get through. We have established dedicated inbound lines for closed communities, such as prisons. Prisoners have nowhere to go if there is no water. We have dedicated inbound lines for closed communities, elected representatives and emergency planners across the council body.

As regards getting people to answer the phones, we have a register in our own group of staff. We have set up means whereby we can muster additional staff into the call centre. I will take you through that in some more detail in an upcoming slide. We also have a formal arrangement with an employment agency. Our first line of defence is our call centre; our second is our staff, and we then have further lines of defence in the form of bringing in additional staff. We are also investing in additional telephony infrastructure known as high-volume call answering, which anyone who has phoned Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) will have experienced. That is another system that we will be bringing online.

The next slide takes you through how we can ramp up and what that ramp up looks like in respect of the number of phone calls that we can answer. On any given day, we normally answer about 1,000 phone calls; on a bad day, in an escalated incident, we could answer 2,000 to 3,000 phone calls. Echo is our call-handling partner and runs our call centre.

On any given day, the call centre will have about 30 people answering the phones, and they can handle up to about 2,000 calls per day. Our first line of defence will be to direct all its back-office staff to answering the telephones, which enables us to handle another 2,000 calls a day. We can turn our company's volunteers who are not deployed to the front line to respond to the cause of the event — no water, flooding or whatever it may be — to the call centre. We can then ramp up through the employment agency and our arrangements with the back-up call centre. Therefore, we have significantly enhanced our ability to ramp up in order to answer a larger number of calls.

The next slide sets the geographical context by showing how we manage an incident and where we are located. The teams in the little bronze boxes are front-line defences; they are the guys who will be out on the ground to fix whatever is wrong. Our seven bronze centres are managed east and west in Altnagelvin and Belfast, where we have an oversight team that looks after the whole operation. In addition, the red circles show where our customer relations centre is. That is our call centre, and we have a dedicated team there to deal with communications to and from customers. The black circles show where our telemetry control centres are. We have telemetry control centres that take in signals from all our assets across Northern Ireland and give us feedback on the state of those assets and how they are performing.

The next couple of slides deal with our approach to contingency planning. Our incident response is based on our major emergency plan, which has been reviewed and updated. It is in line with water industry best practice, and we made changes based on the lessons that we have learned and the various reports that we took feedback from in the wake of the freeze/thaw event. We have created a major emergency group as part of our major incident plan, and that is where Trevor and his senior team would sit and strategically oversee and direct management of the event. The whole company populates our response to any major incident. Not only have we made changes, but we have drilled those changes. We drilled them in the run-up to the winter of last year. Through this year, we have undertaken focused events, specifically looking at matters such as alternative water supplies, getting tankers filled and the time that that takes, as well as conducting a company-wide mock incident exercise in October.

We also have mutual-aid schemes in place with the UK water companies. A development since last year is that we, NIE, BT and Phoenix have got together to see what we can do to help one another in the event of a major emergency, and we have set up a protocol to that effect. We are also engaged with central government through the Civil Contingencies Group (NI) winter resilience working group.

It is important to note that NI Water prepares for winter every year. Our arrangements for doing that are covered in our severe weather strategic game plan, which sets out how we, as a company, operate in any period of severe weather. That plan ensures that everyone is aware of what the incident management structure will be; who will take what role; that we are clear on information flow, upward reporting and working patterns to make sure that any potential event is covered 24/7; and on our protocols, should planned restrictions or alternative water be required. All of that is done under the auspices of our severe weather contingency plan.

Mr Haslett: Many of you are probably familiar with this year's campaign, "Winter-Proof Your Home". We kept the strapline, "Don't Wait. Insulate" because we thought it quite successful last year and Northern Ireland Water has made it largely its own. The campaign has been launched; you have probably seen it on television, papers, billboards, and it will shortly be on buses. It has also been on radio. The winter advertising campaign this year is based on our successful campaign of last year. We achieved a very high awareness factor and a very high recall. Oddly, only 24% of people who were surveyed said that they had taken action, but that was because most had already insulated their property. Last winter was very mild with little disruption, but we are very careful about the fact that we need to look ahead as our best forecast takes us up to the middle of December. It is much the same as today with no real cold temperatures coming in. In fact, the only prediction that we have heard is for late January. I mentioned the perfect storm: everybody would be back at work and vacant property would be occupied. That is one leg of the stool that will probably be in place to protect us.

Building on last year, we decided to try to prompt people into action. We asked them to do a two-step pipe check and insulate. If you have not already done so, just check that. We have rolled that out to various media, particularly the press, and even on the internet, where we have been very strong. It involves two periods, the first of which commenced on 22 October and will last for four to six weeks. The second is in January, when we will go over the same campaign again. You may have heard from Andrew Murray that a leaflet will go out to all homes in Northern Ireland at the same time, and it co-ordinates our campaign message with Roads Service. We have tried to tailor our message to suit

business and farms, particularly farms, because that is where we see the greater risk, based on the experience of two years ago. It is the same strapline but aimed at a particular group.

What are the campaign objectives? We want to warn our customers about unpredictable and extreme weather conditions, and I have gone through the forecast up to the middle of December. We want to promote our role in educating and protecting the community and to raise awareness of the dangers of frozen pipes. Some people do not realise, as we learnt from the last experience, that even if you have a gas boiler and a condensate pipe freezes, which is something that you would not normally think of, that is a risk that homeowners need to look at. We also want to reduce flooding from frozen pipes that burst and to educate the public about their role and responsibilities. That is the important 80% that we are targeting from two years ago. We want to increase awareness of essential services provided, such as, for example, our customer care register: the number of vulnerable customers is now up to just over 2,800. Two years ago, there were fewer than 600 customers on it. Therefore, an enormous piece of work has been done.

The PR campaign was launched by the Minister for Regional Development on 22 October. I hope that we do not get enough snow that you need a huge ice scraper, but we will promote the message about certain items to the public. We have strengthened the website from two years ago, and we are using all the modern methods that we can to get the message across. The website has been considerably updated, and the use of Twitter, Facebook and YouTube in support of our website is aimed at trying to get to a bigger audience. We know that many elected representatives tweet onwards some of the messages that we want to put out.

Ms Venning: Northern Ireland Water will not face the winter conditions alone; the winter will happen to everyone. We have worked over the past 18 months with all our stakeholder groupings to ensure that key messages are delivered. Trevor has shown you that what happened in 2010-11 was essentially due to an increase in demand, and our advertising campaign and work with stakeholders is to try to make people aware that we can all take steps now when the weather is not so inclement to protect ourselves and to prevent such damage from recurring. We are here today, and we bring people to our call centre and work with the councils; we had a council briefing yesterday. We are trying to get our message out to the wider community. Our education team visits schools and tries to educate families by getting children to bring the message home. As I tried to set out earlier, our strategy is about turning ourselves around and being much more proactive. I want everyone to be aware that our key aim is to have a co-ordinated message across all our channels. People should be aware that, whether they phone us, look at our website, use social media or contact us by e-mail, they will get the same consistent message, and we have been working on our systems to make sure that they are set up to deliver that.

We will also have a series of people who will get a formalised stakeholder briefing through events, and that can be added to as events progress and as we understand the different groups of people that we need to communicate with. Our core set of stakeholders set up in the first phase of any event is the Department, the Regional Development Committee, the regulators in the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Drinking Water Inspectorate, as well as the Environment Agency, the Consumer Council, local councils, and business representatives and groupings, including the Ulster Farmers' Union.

As well as looking after our vulnerable customer groupings and communicating progress messages to them and to the other utilities, we have been working with the various resilience forums that have been set up across the country. It is about working together; we will not do this on our own. We need to engage with our stakeholders as much as possible to make sure that the messages have been delivered.

Mr Haslett: In conclusion, Northern Ireland Water has improved its emergency response. We have sustained a company-wide programme, and we are well through the 53 action points that were in the regulator's report. As Sara said, we have gone through a series of mock incidents and desktop exercises since then. We have also nominated key staff to be in place over Christmas and the new year. Those key staff will be people on the senior team — the silver and bronze teams — as well as a volunteer list, and we are refreshing that list with the company. It is important to say that here and to assure you that staff will be in place if there is an incident.

As Sara said, we have made significant improvements to the call centre. However, those are ongoing, particularly the introduction of the Heating and Ventilating Contractors' Association. The information flow and reporting from the field, which was seen as a weakness last time, has been strengthened, as has communication with stakeholders and customers. We have made changes to the major incident plan

and response teams and, importantly, we have new infrastructure in place. We have looked at areas throughout the country where we thought that we could strengthen the infrastructure to provide better resilience. Of course, that work is ongoing.

The partnership approach is vital for success, particularly, as Sara said, in co-operation with other government bodies, local councils and, as you heard, local utilities.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you both for that comprehensive presentation; I almost cut you off there, as it was quite long. However, I have no doubt that things have improved and that a great deal of work has gone into it. Committee members visited the call centre, although I was not there that day, and it looks as though you have made significant changes since then. A strong winter will test you, although I hope that we do not get one. Trevor, in the overall context, are you confident that you can handle a bad winter similar to that of 2010?

Mr Haslett: No one can give guarantees in life, Chairman. However, I can guarantee that, two years on, we are much better prepared. We have spent a great deal of time and effort preparing our resilience and looking at our systems and manpower. A large number of changes has been made, and I am confident that Northern Ireland Water is in a much better place than it was two years ago.

The Deputy Chairperson: I am disappointed that only 24% of people have taken any action. Coming from a rural area, I know that farmers with large farms have — even over the summer months — started to install a new type of system that kicks in. Some fellow has come up with a device that kicks in when the temperature falls so that it does not affect farming adversely. A private industry has come up with this new system, which is called Jack Frost.

Mr Haslett: Yes, obviously we always encourage anybody with a consumer meter to check it regularly. Unfortunately, in the last incident two years ago, some people had not checked the meter until the billing cycle, which was a good four to five months after the event, and then found to their horror that there was a leak. We can be as sympathetic as we can to that with these allowances and even domestic allowances; nevertheless, the message is that you need to check your meter regularly.

Mr Lynch: Before I bring members in, I ask them to keep it fairly brief.

Mr Dallat: I am not a cynical person but, from listening to you, it seems that things must have been in right bad shape two years ago. Your former chief executive Laurence MacKenzie and others were running round like headless chickens that did not know what to do. What has happened in the meantime that has changed all that?

Mr Haslett: Well, for a start, I am sitting here, Mr Dallat, two years on.

Mr Dallat: That means nothing to me, Trevor.

Mr Haslett: Well, I already gave the Chair an assurance that things have moved on. I have invested a lot of time over the past two years going back over what went wrong. We have initiated most of the action points that the Utility Regulator picked up. We admitted that our communication and, indeed, some of the senior management and leadership were not as strong as they should have been. I believe that has been corrected.

It is important to make the point that the Northern Ireland Water people on the ground turned the situation around within 10 days. We restored supplies within 10 days whereas parts of Dublin were still rotating supplies well into February. So, I think it is important to separate some of the criticism of the communication and leadership from what was done on the ground. There was an enormous effort on the ground.

Mr Dallat: That is a very good point, and I am glad that Trevor raised it. Of course, members will know that we paid tribute in an earlier discussion to those who drive the road gritters. Those people on the ground in the water service are the salt of the earth. Morale among your staff was at a very low ebb two years ago. Is it much better now? Can you depend on people to turn up at the call centres? Is the loyalty that was badly damaged by the appallingly bad leadership that was there before now restored?

Mr Haslett: I, along with the senior team, which includes Sara and Ronan, who you will hear from in the next session, have spent two years investing a lot of time in going around staff. I do about nine or 12 question-and-answer sessions a year with every member of staff, so I get a good feel for how morale is. Of course, some staff will raise questions and issues, but, generally, the morale of staff is in a much better place than it was two years ago. It was not great even before we ran into that winter period, but I think that there has been a considerable improvement in morale. Morale is not just about how people nearly felt embarrassed to walk into a supermarket at that time wearing a Northern Ireland Water sweater. That is a great motivator for me and others to make sure that that does not happen again two years on and that our staff are not embarrassed about wearing their sweater during the winter. I can assure you that I picked that up with a lot of staff since then. Morale is in a much better place.

Mr Dallat: That is very good news. A lot of your advertising material is directed at people and how they can help. In the meantime, presumably, you have addressed the issue of those networks of pipes that were bursting all over, particularly in rural areas, and that had been in the ground for 30, 40, 50 or 60 years. However, a lot of those people you are directing advertising material at are living as tenants of the Housing Executive, housing associations or private landlords. What sort of progress have you made with those who own the properties and who are the only people in a key position to do the insulation and the other things that are needed?

Mr Haslett: I know from sitting on the Civil Contingencies Group (NI) during that period that the Housing Executive had something like 80,000 work orders. We have, as Sara said, identified key stakeholders — the Housing Executive is one of them — to make sure that the message goes out about insulation and checking on simple things such as where stopcocks are and making sure that if you have a tank in your roof space, you open your roof space for at least a couple of hours each day. All of that has been covered in stakeholder communications. The message is really that it is a contract. We would like the customer to be aware of what they need to do. The other side of the contract is that we have been out since then repairing key water mains. We still do not have the resilience in Northern Ireland that I would like, where you could move water from Ballymena down to the seven o'clock position in Tyrone and Fermanagh. Our interconnectivity is still not good, but we are working on that. We have installed at least two major trunk mains, which were finished within that two-year period.

Mr Dickson: Thank you for your presentation this morning. It is useful to know how far forward Northern Ireland Water has come in respect of these issues.

First, what effect will the Finance Minister's recent announcement on changes in the call centre contact in Northern Ireland have on you? If it has no effect on you, will it have added to confusion about how to contact you rather than NI Direct?

Secondly, I wholly appreciate the work that has been done. I have been to the call centre and have seen the work that is being done to ensure that you are able to deploy additional staff as an incident arises. That is all well and good; it answers the phone, but I do not know whether it answers people's questions. Answering the phone maybe deals with people's frustrations, but it is actually only a tiny part of dealing with the issues as they arise. Although you appear to have done a good amount of work on being able to answer the phone, what additional resources have you put towards ensuring that if there is a period of freeze or freeze-thaw, the people on the ground are able to deal with burst pipes and incidents as they escalate? Have you been able to deploy the same amount of resources to deal with that as you have to resolving the issue around answering the phone?

Mr Haslett: Sara will deal with the phone question first, and I will come back on the second one.

Ms Venning: On the Minister's statement yesterday; the NI Direct contract, as it was known, was always owned by a third party. It has just passed to another third party. So, that does not impact in any way on how Northern Ireland Water answers its calls. It does impact on us in relation to the flooding incident line. That line has been set up. None of the numbers has changed, so the important thing is to make sure that the protocols and the processes between the flooding incident line and the flood response agencies are well defined and well understood.

There is a job of work to be done. We have begun to engage with BT, which has taken over that contract, to specify the protocols that we would like to see in place. So, an interim arrangement has been operating for the past six to nine months. We will specify the improvements that we would like to see in our interactions, and we will work with the other flood response agencies to see those

improvements delivered. That, again, was referred to by Minister Wilson yesterday morning. So, yesterday's announcement does not change anything for NI Water.

Mr Dickson: In the same way as you have run mock incidents for winter readiness, are there plans to run mock flood incidents to test those systems? That seems to be the area on which we fell down just a few months ago, and not very far from here.

Ms Venning: The last mock flood incident was called — excuse me if I do not pronounce this right — Exercise Eluvies. That was run by Belfast City Council last November. One of the recommendations of the performance and efficiency delivery unit report was that that exercise be run again in the very near future.

Mr Dickson: That will be an opportunity to test BT as well.

Ms Venning: The previous exercise did not test the flooding incident line response. NI Water would not instigate that test of the flood incident line; it is probably something for Minister Wilson to consider. We would be supportive, and we will play into any exercise that is established. We will certainly want to test the new processes that are devised.

Mr Dickson: Surely we need the professionals' input into that. You cannot say that a Minister, no matter how good they may be, can have the insight into what does or does not need to be done. Surely that professional advice and the decision to involve the call centre on how calls come in have to involve a multiagency decision in this case.

Mr Haslett: We actually work quite closely with the new third party. I will not mention its name, but everybody knows who it is. That information flow is key to us. It is one of the key issues going back to that incident or any incident. If any information comes into the flood line, we need to get it batched up and sent to our call centre. It is all done by computer, so we can be on the case very quickly, know where the clusters of calls are coming from and have our teams on the ground get there as soon as possible. We are actually working with that third party to make sure that that happens.

Mr Dickson: Is that not where there is potential for breakdown? Is it not when an intermediary has to pass the information to you? I have a simple question, which may be completely off the wall: why did you not compete for the work to provide the call centre delivery of the flood line?

Mr Haslett: That is maybe a question for another day. There are a lot of things that Northern Ireland Water could do if we did not have our current governance arrangements. We could outsource quite a lot of our expertise. Maybe that will come up in the second session.

I would like to deal with the second question briefly, which was about what will be different on the ground. In my reply to Mr Dallat, I said that we manage to get things turned round in 10 days. I have no reason to suggest that that would not happen again. I have spoken to the staff, as has Sara, in question-and-answer sessions. They are well motivated and committed. Do not forget that we also have access to the contractors that we used the last time. We have our operations and maintenance contractor, Meridian Utilities, and our capital works contractors, who are all geared up if we need to bring them in to make repairs to our infrastructure.

Mr Ó hOisín: Thanks, Trevor and Sara. The incident of two years ago was very much described in the media as "a perfect storm", or whatever name they put on it. In real terms, it was not the freeze per se that did the damage; it was the thaw. That afforded a period of time, although I know it happened over a holiday period. What engagement have you had, Trevor, with people in areas where 80% of the losses occurred the last time round — the likes of sports clubs, factories, schools, and what have you? Is there an opportunity there? Can something be rolled out fairly rapidly should that situation ever develop again?

Mr Haslett: Sara has covered quite a comprehensive list of stakeholders. We have advised them on what they need to do. Two years ago, we worked very closely with the educational people because all the schools were closed. In fact, it was due to that co-operation two years ago that I think only three or four schools did not open when they came back after the holidays. That was due largely to the work that was done between the education boards and us. We had people on the ground turning water off in schools.

We will prepare ourselves and gear ourselves up depending on what the forecast is, because the timing is crucial. The rapid thaw during that period could not have hit at a worse time from the point of view of Northern Ireland Water, when everywhere was vacant. However, there is quite comprehensive stakeholder coverage. We talked about silver and bronze teams. We have people who are nominated to speak to stakeholder groups if there is an incident. Nominated people have that role during an incident. They are told that they must contact the education authority or the Rivers Agency, for example. All those roles are predetermined and there are names against them.

Mr Ó hOisín: A number of the problems happened because pipes were unlagged, not at the right depth, and what have you. Is there any way to look at some sort of statutory requirement for work to be done to prevent that, say, perhaps, through building control?

Mr Haslett: Well, it is a mixture. Two years ago, we also worked with building control. One of the Utility Regulator's recommendations was to look at that area. We contacted building control throughout the councils to see whether they could police that work better. We actually police it ourselves because we look at and inspect a lot of the infrastructure that goes into estates. Some of the difficulty is that some of the infrastructure is in before the ground is actually made up.

We know that a number of developments and groups of houses are potentially at risk because of shallow supply pipes. We have been looking at that to see what we can do. We believe that there is a technique that other people, such as Scottish Water, use that is able to thaw pipes, but we have not been completely convinced that it should be used if that happened again on a shallow supply pipe. However, we have been looking at that area.

Mr McAleer: I would like to be clear about your telephony plans. Trevor, am I correct in saying that you stated that on 28 December 2010, Northern Ireland Water received 403,000 calls?

Mr Haslett: That is right.

Mr McAleer: I see that on the plans for the improved call-handling escalation, we have reached a high point of 10,000 calls. There is a massive difference between that and the number of calls that came in on 28 December 2010. Can the proposed call-handling escalation mechanism handle more than that? It is not even close to the number of calls made on the day.

Ms Venning: What we maybe did not say is that those hundreds of thousands of calls that came in linked back to 32,000 individual callers. So what was happening was that people were phoning in and hitting *5 on their phone to redial again and again. There were 32,000 distinct individual callers. We can answer 10,000 phone calls. A lot of what people ask for is information, so the interactive voice recognition system (IVR) can provide that. That allows the person to phone through, get the information they need and then hang up. With the combination of IVR and the additional call handlers, we believe that there is sufficient capacity to deal with the number of calls that we expect.

The key really is information. If we are able to get our message out through all channels — web, internet and our call agents — and we can phone people and make them aware, fewer people will need to phone us. So all those actions combined stand to give us the chance to respond to customers.

Mr Hussey: I would like to pay tribute to your staff. I know that in our part of the world, west Tyrone, they are excellent when we have problems. In fact, they were out the other day at a burst water main two doors from my house. I have a lot of praise for them.

I have a couple of very quick questions. How are vulnerable customers identified? For how long did the mock exercise last, and how many staff were involved in it?

Ms Venning: Vulnerable customers are identified by virtue of the fact that they have made themselves known to us. We have run campaigns with vulnerable customer groupings; we hold vulnerable customer focus days, when representative groups come to us; and we also advertise through doctors' surgeries and various outlets the fact that we have a vulnerable customer register. We have increased the number of people registered with us from the 500 or 600 mark to over 2,000. Those people are on our systems. If there is an incident, we can link that through: we can look at the distinct geographic area and understand immediately who is vulnerable and likely to be affected.

Yesterday, we had councils with us. Councillors told us that they had such-and-such a community group and that they knew of people who would like to be on the register. It is really only a matter of phoning through to us on Waterline, with the person's name and details, and we will put them on the register. So we kicked that off with a number of councillors yesterday.

Your second query was about the mock incident. It lasted from 8.00 am until 6.00 pm and it simulated a two-day event. The first half of the day was day one and the second half day two. It simulated a freeze-thaw event in extremis, if you like. It simulated the loss of our largest water treatment works, and a smaller water treatment works in a completely different geographical part of Northern Ireland. It tested all our systems, almost to destruction.

You asked how many people were involved in the exercise. All seven bronze centres were fully populated and all the silver teams were fully populated. Every incident team was fully populated. The only people who were not exercised were those who fix burst pipes because we did not have any burst pipes to fix. However, all our incident teams were involved. So, that would have run into the hundreds.

The Deputy Chairperson: I do not think that there are any other questions. Trevor, you are staying with us; Sara, I wish you the best of luck, whatever happens.

Ms Venning: Thank you very much.