

Consumer Complaint Determination

2014/51

Chlorine Taste

8 September 2014

DWQR Inspector:
William Byers

Basis of complaint

Scottish Water has supplied water with a high level of chlorine making it undrinkable

Context of complaint

The Consumer in the Neilston area of East Renfrewshire had made a number of complaints since March 2014, regarding a strong taste of chlorine in the supply. Despite many visits from Scottish Water representatives who had tested the water for chlorine content, taken samples for analysis and explained the reasons for the particular levels of chlorine found, the consumer remained dissatisfied with the response. A formal complaint was made on 28 May identifying the particular concerns: that Scottish Water were providing wrong information regarding the supply; wrong information on chlorine levels and that they were unable to regulate the chlorine dosing properly at the treatment works. The complaint also identified the conduct and manner of a representative as being unacceptable.

DWQR Assessment of complaint and the actions taken

The investigation has shown that Scottish Water made a speedy response to the initial call, visiting within two hours and again later in the evening to check chlorine levels. These are noted to be 0.7 mg/l (milligrams per litre) Free chlorine and 0.81 mg/l Total chlorine. The consumer's understanding at this time was that the water supply came from Milngavie Water Treatment Works (WTW). Scottish Water's records show that they confirmed at the visit that the supply was produced at the nearby Neilston WTW. Although these circumstances changed in August, this was the correct information at the time. The proximity of the property to Neilston WTW means that the level of chlorine in the water is higher than that experienced by consumers at the extremities of the distribution system. Scottish Water's representative however recognised the measurements to be slightly higher than desired and initiated flushing of the mains and checks to be carried out at the works. DWQR considers these to have been appropriate actions.

In response to further contacts from the consumer, in which concern was again expressed about the taste of chlorine but also about particles in the water, a build-up of deposits in the kettle and effects on health, Scottish Water arranged for a sample of the water supply to be taken. This sample failed due to the Coliform standard being breached. Follow up sampling was undertaken, as is normal practice, and these resamples showed the water supply to meet the required standards. The original sample failure was therefore attributed to the condition or design of the kitchen tap and the consumer found this conclusion to be unacceptable. Although this can be an unpalatable thought for householders and difficult to accept, it is a fairly common cause of sample failures. DWQR has found no evidence of misrepresentation of results and finds no legitimate cause for concern regarding the information provided in relation to the sample result or the sampling methods.

Chlorine ensures the water supply remains safe as it travels through the sometimes extensive water mains system and private pipework to consumers. It is an acceptable method of achieving a safe drinking water and DWQR must regulate Scottish Water in accordance with industry standards and legislation. The World Health Organisation has set a health based guideline maximum value of 5 mg/l for chlorine as a residual disinfectant in drinking water. The levels in tap water in Scotland are well below this guideline and Scottish Water, in common with most water companies aim to keep the level below 1 mg/l. The important indicator for this, is the Free chlorine measurement and records of the various tests carried out at the property show the levels to have reduced from 0.7 mg/l at the time of the original contact in March, to around 0.46 mg/l in May and June.

There is evidence in the records to suggest there was a difficulty in the automatic control of the chlorine dosing equipment at the works but through selective manual adjustment, the level of chlorine in the final water from the works has been shown to have reduced from around 0.8 mg/l to around 0.6 mg/l in the same period. DWQR therefore considers Scottish Water to have demonstrated a responsiveness to the consumer's concerns and minimised the level of chlorine bearing in mind the requirements to maintain disinfection residual for consumers throughout the entire distribution system. Supply to the area was switched over to Milngavie water on 10 August 2014 and records show the level of chlorine at the storage tanks at Neilston to be more consistent at around 0.6 mg/l since then. A measurement at the property on 27 August showed a level of 0.24 mg/l which DWQR considers should not give any cause for concern.

In relation to the conduct and manner of a Scottish Water representative, this was investigated by Scottish Water and a response was provided. The consumer expressed dissatisfaction with the response in that it was issued on plain unheaded paper and there were no contact details contained in it leading to a suspicion that it was not an official letter. Information provided by Scottish Water to DWQR shows this to have been an administrative error with their file copy being sent out and the top copy, intended for the consumer, being filed. Whilst this may be an unfortunate error, it significantly inflamed an already worrisome situation for the consumer and in this regard, DWQR finds Scottish Water to have demonstrated an unprofessional approach to customer service.

DWQR considers it possible that there may be elements of the plumbing system within the property that may be affecting the supply and creating taste. Kettles, old washers in taps and appliance fittings and appliance hoses themselves have been found to impart taste to the cold water supply and to boiled water for hot drinks. Whilst responsibility for internal plumbing rests with the householder or property owner DWQR expects Scottish Water to provide information to consumers on this possibility and in terms of completeness in such extended complaint cases, expects this possibility to be explored.

DWQR however is satisfied that Scottish Water has established that it's supply meets the regulatory requirements and the amount of chlorine in the supply is being maintained at a suitable level.

Recommendations

DWQR recommends that Scottish Water:

1. Review processes to ensure only official copies of correspondence are issue to consumers.
2. Provide information and advice to the consumer in relation to the causes of taste complaints within domestic plumbing arrangements.

