

Consumer Complaint Determination

2015/16

Odour of water supply and illness

17 March 2015

DWQR Inspector:
William Byers

Basis of complaint

Scottish Water has supplied water which causes offensive odour on tableware and crockery and is the cause of ill health. Further, that Scottish Water has failed to provide satisfactory explanation or information regarding the supply.

Context of complaint

The Consumer has made a number of complaints between 19 May 2014, through to 2 March 2015, regarding a foul smell to the water which left tableware and crockery unpleasant to use. The consumer also attributed aspects of ill health suffered by family members to the quality of the tap water. A similar complaint had been reported and investigated in July 2011 and with no subsequent contacts arising, the issue was considered resolved. In the recent contacts, despite visits from Scottish Water representatives who had investigated the supply system and taken samples for analysis and many discussions with scientific and public health staff, the consumer remained dissatisfied with their conclusions. A formal complaint was made to Scottish Water on 28 January 2015, raising a number of concerns around water quality, sample results, the water supply system investigations carried out and provision of information. Scottish Water's response on 2 March failed, in the consumer's eyes, to fully address the issues.

DWQR Assessment of complaint and the actions taken

As continuing dissatisfaction with the quality of the supply was being expressed at intervals over the 10 months, or new information on the supply system came to light, samples were required to be taken. Whilst perhaps an inconvenience to consumers, DWQR considers this an essential requirement to obtain information for understanding the root cause of problems. However, DWQR considers the instances where arrangements for sampling fell through or resampling was required, contributed considerably to the elongation of Scottish Water's investigations. There were nine samples taken to examine different aspects of quality and rearrangements were required to be made six times due to a range of factors e.g. failure to collect samples timeously, failure to take samples when arranged, failure to take samples in the correct bottles for the required particular analysis and intrusion of other work demands on staff. All of which inspires little confidence in the consumer of Scottish Water's commitment to resolving their important concerns.

Investigation of the connection to the water mains and the supply into the house determined that the supply pipe passed through the neighbour's ground before entering the subject's property. In the course of the investigation it became apparent that a tap in the garden of the property remained on an old private water supply. At this time and with concerns of a possible cross connection existing in the system between the public and private supplies at an unknown location, Scottish Water installed a double check valve at the boundary stopcock to prevent backflow of any possible contamination into the public water mains.

Subsequent investigation indicated the two systems were not interlinked but DWQR recognises this to be a standard response in these situations and considers it to be a responsible action to take to preserve water quality in the mains.

With on-going concerns over the water quality, a Byelaws inspection was made by Scottish Water on 11 November that confirmed there to be no cross connection with the private supply. It was found however that there was a contravention of the Byelaws within the internal plumbing system in that a combination water heater was installed with an improper cross connection to the heating system. Scottish Water recommended correctly, that this fault should be rectified and it is noted in Scottish Water records that the consumer undertook to do this as soon as possible. The consumer has advised DWQR that this was carried out during the following week. DWQR considers this to have been a significant route for possible back-siphonage to occur and introduce contamination of the domestic water supply which would affect the pH and taste. There is however no indication in the analysis of all sample results of this happening, although it is possible there may have been undetected episodic occurrence.

Information provided in response to the original contact on 19 May was timely and appropriate with a full written explanation of sample results and confirmation that there were no failures of the water quality standards, being provided by 13 June. Additional information leaflets were provided to explain standards and the causes of taste in the water supply. However, with the on-going concerns and a number of samples being taken, DWQR considers the timescales for providing information to the consumer on the results of analysis to be inconsistent and in some instances, unacceptably late. The failure to provide confirmation of sample results in good time is likely to have added to the increasing dissatisfaction with the response to the concerns and frustration at lack of progress.

In the course of the investigations, hydrocarbons were identified in some samples. Whilst no cause has been determined for this, such detections can indicate ingress through plastic pipework or faulty plumbing and DWQR is satisfied that there are no significant concerns in this regard with the integrity of the system. Satisfactory resampling following the detection and other samples taken over the course of further investigations at the property provide comfort that the supply is clear of any contamination.

With regard to the formal complaint, Scottish Water responded, summarising the steps taken investigating the complainant's long standing issues. In this, reference was made to their previous communications which provided detailed information on sample results, the supply system investigations, their implications and a reiteration of the overall conclusion of the supply being safe to drink. DWQR considers the provided information in the correspondence to be an accurate assessment of the situation. In making this response, however, Scottish Water failed to directly respond to particular points raised in the formal complaint and did not respond to a further letter from the consumer pressing those points. In DWQR's view, these questions should have been addressed to clarify matters for the consumer.

Recommendations

DWQR is satisfied that Scottish Water has demonstrated the public water supply meets the required standards and is safe to drink.

DWQR considers Scottish Water to have taken the necessary steps to carry out appropriate investigation of the taste complaint, to have provided accurate information in their assessment of sample results, made appropriate interpretation of the supply system and to have provided appropriate water quality advice. DWQR however, also considers Scottish Water to have failed to carry through arrangements at agreed times leading to an unnecessary prolonging of the complaint investigations, failed to provide timely confirmation of sample results and failed to fully address relevant questions in a formal complaint.

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DWQR recommends that Scottish Water:

1. Makes apology to the consumer and responds to the direct questions posed in the formal complaint.
2. Reviews internal processes to ensure sampling and other visit commitments are met.
3. Reviews their sample results confirmation process to ensure they meet timescale commitments stated in their public information leaflets.

