



# WaterTalk

## Sewer Flooding Experience

A WaterTalk research report prepared for United Utilities

May 2021

# Background, approach and summary

# Research background

Sewer blockages are becoming increasingly common, and are usually caused by customers incorrectly flushing items / pouring items down the drain.

There is a need to raise awareness and change customer behaviour through messaging around the causes and impact of sewage flooding issue.

In order to create impactful messaging, United Utilities wanted to hear from customers who have experienced sewer flooding in their homes and gardens as a result of a blockage in the past. to understand their experiences. Their stories will help inspire future campaigns.

# Research objectives and approach

## The overall objectives of the research are to:

- Capture customer stories in their own words of what happened to them and the practical and emotional impact this has had on their lives
- Understand their awareness of how such flooding is caused and how that makes them feel
- Identify if there has been any behaviour change as a result of the sewer flooding
- Understand what kind of future messaging might be impactful and help to create further behaviour change across the UU region

The outputs will help United Utilities identify how best to communicate around the issue of Sewer Flooding and poor flushing behaviour in future communications, with the use of customer stories to help inspire future campaigns around the issue.

## What we did:



**One online focus group of 90 minutes and one Zoom interview of 45 minutes**



**Fieldwork took place on Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> May and Monday 17<sup>th</sup> May**



**5 Community Members (3 Males, 2 Females, 3 unmeasured, 2 measured)**

# Executive overview

## Executive overview

The impact of sewer flooding leads to a mix of negative emotions – such as **anxiety, embarrassment, stress and anger**. There is also the practical disruption it has on day-to-day life, with time needed to get the problem fixed and the time needed to clean up the aftermath .

**Understanding of the causes of sewer blockages is high** – particularly after the experience has occurred. **The experience itself leads to behaviour change**, with people more conscious of the actions they and their neighbours can take to reduce the risk of it occurring.

**Incorporating the personal impact of sewer flooding in comms** (as opposed to wider environmental concerns) such as the costs, impact on neighbours and household are seen to be the **most effective ways to enhance messaging on the issue**.

# Sewage Flooding – Case studies

# Russell's story

Male / 35-54



Lives in a 3 bedroom semi-detached house with his wife and daughter



Writer, so he spends most of his day at home for work



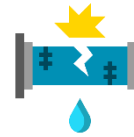
Due to the nature of his work life hasn't changed dramatically due to the pandemic and restrictions

External flooding



Issue resolved within a day

## What happened?



- Initially noticed a **persistent smell emanating from his downstairs bathroom**, with the toilet water discoloured. This was going on for a while unchecked as the downstairs bathroom is used for storage
- Had to call a plumber who noticed there was a **hairline crack in his outside sewage pipe**
- **Water was back flowing due to a blockage in the sewage pipe**, this was **caused by his elderly neighbours** flushing incontinence products down their toilet
- **The plumber had to fill in the broken pipe and clear the blockage** from further down the sewer pipe, this took around a day to complete
- He took responsibility for cleaning up the mess in his garden and paying for the repairs partly due to **sensitivity in bringing up the issue with his elderly neighbours (one of whom had dementia, it being likely that his incontinence products caused the blockage)**



# The immediate impact on his environment from the sewage leak was significant, an embarrassing situation to be in.

## Personal impact of flooding

- **The worst impact was the smell;** which made his house uninhabitable, and led to his wife and children having to move out for the night
- **Feelings of embarrassment** at the situation, with a concern that friends/family would visit at any moment
- The fact that it was **his neighbours sewage made it feel much more unpleasant**

*The unpleasant smell was the worse thing, it was a great source of horror to the kids and an embarrassment for us having that smell in / around our house.... don't think most of my friends even knew that we had an issue with the sewers and the drains, because you don't want to give them the story*

35-54, Unmeasured



## Prevention

**With all the media coverage around the issue he and wife are cautious with what is put down the sink.** The impact of the flooding has made him and his family more wary of the environmental / personal damage that can be caused

His sympathetic response to his neighbours was brought about by the fact that they were **largely unaware of what they doing**, yet he feels further awareness / knowledge could have prevented this



**Make the personal impact clear** – He feels that more can be done to push the fact that people's actions can impact their neighbours and the wider environment

*If people don't realise they are being selfish you need to tell them that it impacts you, your neighbours and the environment. There are the three hitters that appeal to people's better natures*

35-54, Unmeasured

# Ali's story

Male / 35-54



Lives in a semi-detached house with his wife and three young children



Works as a data administrator, his job is currently being undertaken from home



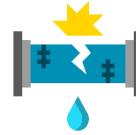
He has had to combine work and childcare since the pandemic, and is looking forward to getting back into the office

External flooding



Issue experienced twice within two years, finally resolved within a day

## What happened?



- The drain in his garden was overflowing, with water rising above the threshold and subsequently leading to his garden flooding
- He called out a plumber who checked the man-hole cover and noticed that it was around 60%/70% above capacity
- The issue was caused by a blockage further down the drain, with the plumber having to dig into the manhole to clear the blockage
- The blockage was so severe that water was backing up and caused serious flooding in his garden, with the contents on the blockage (e.g. wipes) all overflowing in this space
- This subsequently led to further issues a year and half later, with a blockage in the pipes causing waste water from his house backing up and flooding his neighbours garden
- He had to call out United Utilities, who identified that the that blockage in the shared pipe was causing the issue, with United Utilities subsequently clearing the blockage
- The issue was fixed, with Ali more aware of the shared nature of the sewage system and the impact that his and his neighbours actions when flushing contents down the sink can have on each other

# The situation caused a great deal of unnecessary stress that turned to anger at his neighbours for putting him and his family in this state.

## Personal impact of flooding

- **The situation brought stress to the family**, this made things difficult for an already busy household
- **It impacted Ali's confidence in the state of the sewage system below their home**
- **He was angry at his neighbours and previous tenants** for incorrectly put things down the sink and toilet that had the most negative impact on him and his family



*It knocked my confidence. I thought drainage infrastructure was really poor in my house and I wondered if I was going to make my own preparations to make sure that it doesn't happen again*  
35-54, Unmeasured

## Prevention

The impact of his own experience has led him to question the wider sewage system, **with more awareness around it's vulnerability needed**

**He is prepared to engage in open dialogue with his neighbours in order to prevent it from occurring again**



**Make the financial impact clear** – He had to pay for repairs himself and feels that if people were made aware of this, or even around potential fines if traced back to individuals, then this would help act as a deterrent

*You have to make people learn that by doing their bit they'll keep the cost of their water rates down*  
35-54, Unmeasured

# Tyrone's story

Male / 18-34



Lives in a ground floor flat



Spends a lot of time in his flat due to his disability



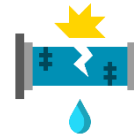
Biggest impact of COVID-19 has been the lack of access to his support groups, which is the main thing he is looking forward to – and being able to volunteer to support others himself

External flooding



Issue took a week to be resolved

## What happened?



- Tyrone woke up one day and noticed a really **unpleasant smell coming from his garden**
- **He noticed that his garden and area outside his flat had been completely flooded**, with dirty water covering the garden and rising steadily
- He called United Utilities who took a few days to send out a repair team, this led to the **experience being a long lasting and unpleasant one – particularly caused by fears around the potential of the inside of his flat being flooded**
- They confirmed to him that the issue was caused by his **neighbours putting incorrect things down the plumbing** (mainly food items, and oil/grease)
- Once United Utilities had cleared the blockage **he had to clean the backyard**, which was an **unpleasant and arduous task**



# The close proximity of the flood led to anxiety that his home and possessions would be damaged by the sewage flooding.

## Personal impact of flooding

- **Real distress and concern** was caused around the fact that his downstairs flat could be flooded out
- **The smell was really unpleasant and long lasting**, with it impossible for him to go out in his garden for a few weeks after the event
- **He had to personally clean up the garden and mess himself**, which is was not only unpleasant but also a time consuming and very difficult task



*This is essentially what my garden looked like, I was shocked and concerned it would come into my flat*  
18-34, Unmeasured

## Prevention

**He is more aware of the impact his neighbours have on his own sewage, and how it is something communal that needs to be considered by all residents**

**He is extra wary about preventing food from going down the sink and purchased a filter to try and limit this as much as possible**, yet the main concern is that he can't control his neighbours' actions



**Hygiene is key** – The impact on him and his flat is has led him to feel that people need to be aware of the potential negative impact that over flowing sewers can have on health. This is more prevalent with the impact of COVID-19

*Another angle which would be good to explain here is the personal hygienic impact that it could potentially have with something like a sewer flooding... with COVID it would be a good time to highlight the potential illnesses you can get from sewage water*

18-34, Measured

# Mamoona's story

Female / 55+



Lives at home with her husband, with older children who no longer live at home but who visit regularly



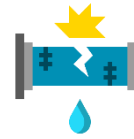
Retired, and so the pandemic has had relatively little impact on her

Internal and external flooding



Issue resolved within a few days

## What happened?



- **Her sink began to overflow with discoloured water.** After trying to fix the blockage herself she eventually called United Utilities
- The issue was not just sink related, and led to a **bad smell permeating outside the house / neighbourhood**, which made it an unpleasant experience to leave the house
- It took a few days before a repair team was sent out, this led to the **smell being persistent for days and made her immediate house/environment unpleasant**
- It took around 4/5 hours for United Utilities to identify the problem under the manhole and then clear the blockage – **the process led to dirty water flooding all over her garden**
- **Once the issue was resolved the clean up process lasted a several hours** – this was extremely unpleasant but the urgency of the issue led her to get it done quickly

# The incident was stressful and embarrassing, particularly as family had been visiting, and the clean-up took considerable effort.

## Personal impact of flooding

- **The smell was very unpleasant, almost overpowering**
- **It was ‘embarrassing’ to have family visiting while this all went on**, with the smell / flood making it impossible for her and her family to go out into the garden
- **Not being able to use water for several hours was the biggest impact**, combined with the fact that she had to spend her own time cleaning up the mess

*I had family around, and there were young kids in the house too. This meant all of us couldn't go outside because the smell was just so bad. It was a stressful situation.*

55+, Measured

## Prevention

**The incident made her more aware of the causes**, and her and her family are now more proactive in ensuring that their sinks do not get blocked

**She keeps in contact with neighbours around the issue as she feel it is a communal responsibility**, with the drainage now something that everyone on her streets ensures is maintained and looked after. Any issues are quickly shared and reported.



**Raise awareness via social media and other channels** – Whilst her neighbourhood are now aware of sewage flooding this is not something that they were familiar with before

*I think mainly, we need to be better aware. The slides that you showed about the campaign that was run recently, I wasn't aware of that. I think that needs to be more out there.*

55+, Measured



# Rebecca's story

Female / 18-34



Lives in a new home with her partner and young child. The estate has experienced issues with sewers before, but only outdoors



Works as a primary school teacher, although was on maternity leave at the time of the incident

Internal and external flooding



Issue resolved within two days

## What happened?



- **Returning home from hospital after an emergency C-section around midnight, with a newborn child**, she and her partner were confronted with water and sewage slowly rising up from the toilets, sinks and shower tray
- **They phoned United Utilities who were 'wonderful' and promised to get a team round as quickly as possible and kept phoning to check on them.** Meanwhile, her partner kept her isolated from the flooding and neighbours helped to clear things – she did not have to leave the home
- **United Utilities**, when they arrived a couple of hours later were **unable to enter the network as the council had not completed the road adoption.** This led to them calling out Dyno-Rod, who arrived in the morning, and managed to clear some of the blockage.
- **The blockage had been caused by a neighbour disposing of materials following resurfacing their driveway** – this neighbour seems to care little about those nearby and caused similar problems in the past, flushing nappies and causing external flooding. **Rebecca also blames the housebuilders for poorly designed drainage under the estate**
- **Eventually the blockage was cleared and the affected areas sanitised – Rebecca remained calm but admits it was a very stressful situation, particularly with a newborn baby**



# An extremely stressful situation; it was eventually resolved by family and neighbours pulling together.

## Personal impact of flooding

- The flooding was a very difficult distraction from the fact that she had just returned home with her child
- She was largely kept away from the flooding, but her mother was particularly distressed that it was happening, and her partner had to sanitise and clean the house
- Rebecca is remarkably calm about the ordeal, but is angry with both her neighbours and the housebuilders for allowing this to happen, particularly as they have had issues before

*It was a really stressful time... but everybody pulled together to protect us as best they could.*

18-34, Measured

## Prevention

She was already aware of the causes, due to external sewer flooding having happened before, and has always been careful about what they flush/pour.

The neighbours are all aware that it is a problem and know what not to do, but she feels that the neighbour that caused the issue, and has done so in the past should be fined or punished in some way; though they do not accept responsibility.



**Awareness is something she feels strongly should be built early on, while children are in school.**

With the current focus on the environment, she feels young people are prime targets for this kind of information.

*Young people... care about this kind of thing. They are more likely to tell their parents about it and spread the message.*

18-34, Measured

# What can UU do to prevent this?

# There is some appetite for United Utilities to take action against repeat offenders, but some feel it could be difficult to enforce.

- The idea of finding or taking action against customers that repeatedly block sewers is polarising
- Some customers question whether you would be able to prove that it is a particular household
- Some customers that have experienced flooding would be keen to see this enforcement action; they see that, as well as the impact of flooding, the work required can increase bills for customers
- Others feel that it might be too difficult to enforce; it is United Utilities' job to maintain the sewers regardless. On top of this – one customer feels upgrading the infrastructure to better deal with waste throughput is required

*If there's a problem and it's not my fault, I expect them to solve it. The person that's flushing nappies down the toilet isn't going to solve it. I would say, I pay my water rates so they make sure this works correctly. I know it's not fair. People are misusing the system, but to me, that's why United Utilities get paid the money, so that they can deal with these things.*

35-54, Unmeasured

*Fine, them, if you could. It's hard getting to prove it's them, that's the problem. In an ideal situation if you could pinpoint that particular property and say 'look, you are causing a massive issue', then you should be able to fine them. And it's frustrating, because if you are getting called out all the time and you can't fine them, it's going to send other customers' bills up.*

18-34, Measured

# Environmental impact of sewage flooding

# Customers make the link between the wider environmental impact of sewage flooding and the impact that this has on the individual.



## Environmental impact

- The issue is seen to link in to current concerns around pollution and global warming, and the recognition that it is an issue we all need to tackle
- This makes the sewage system vulnerable, and leads it to a point where this threatens the wider environment
- Single-use plastics is a key concern, with the manufacturers expected to make bio-degradable wipes etc to help prevent sewage blockages

*It leads to the degradation of the infrastructure, which impacts of the whole ecology of the sitting water*  
35-54, Measured

*It links in with wider destroying on the environment... and highlights the need for companies to make degradable products*  
18-34, Measured

*It impacts the whole environment, particularly the strong smell from the sewage which affects everyone nearby*  
55+, Unmeasured

*With the current COVID-19 it seem more important than before to highlight the impact that the environmental damage has on personal health*  
18-34, Unmeasured



## Personal impact

- The impact on the personal environment is clear (e.g. house, garden)
- The smell from sewage flooding affects everyone – with the issue not being exclusive to the individual(s) who caused the flooding
- The risk that the environmental impact has on health issues (such as bacteria in water), which is of particular concern with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic

# Awareness of the causes of sewer blockages is high among these customers – and they feel blockages occur not due to a lack of information but a lack of care.

There was the perception that awareness of sewage blockages should be high due to recent media coverage around fatbergs and the causes of these.

Not only has there been high levels of media coverage on the issue but it is also seen to be something that should be common knowledge (e.g. it's 'obvious' that wipes / nappies etc should not be flushed down the toilet)

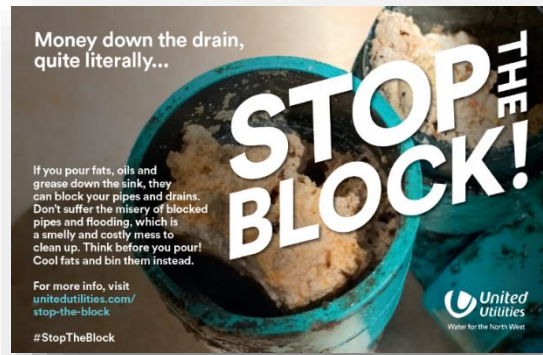
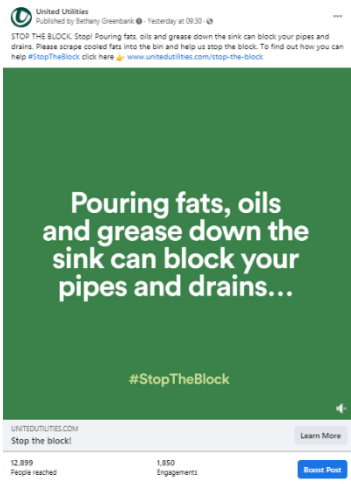
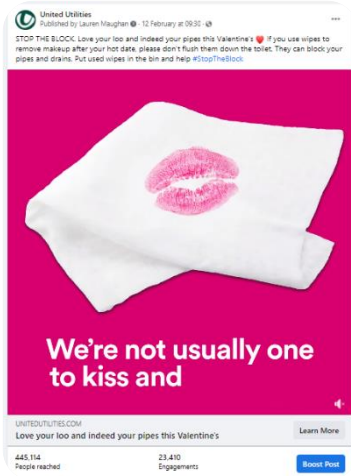
This influences the need for communications – with the personal impact on your household and neighbours seen to be the key message, not one around the causes of blockages itself.

*Considering the media coverage of the fatbergs I'd be surprised if people were still oblivious as to the causes of these*  
35-54, Unmeasured

*All you need to say to people is, here is a list of things not to be sticking into your sewers, because if you do, it will block your sewer, and that will cause you money and damage.*  
35-54, Unmeasured

# Expectations of communications

# Awareness of the Stop the Block campaign from United Utilities is low – with information gathered from other sources.



- **Prior knowledge of the social media campaign was low**, with customers stating that they had obtained previous information on sewer blockages through the TV, leaflets and other channels.
- There was a feeling that a campaign like this is **not something that would go viral or be widely talked about due to its unpleasant nature**. Communications around this should therefore be more direct and simple, focusing on the personal impact (cost, impact on households) as opposed to wider environmental concerns.

*I've not seen any of these, I do vaguely remember education before in the past by presumably the water companies saying, don't flush things, but that was a long time ago.*  
35-54, Unmeasured

*Why would you go out of your way to watch a campaign message around this, though? It needs to be engaging. That's not going to go viral, because no one's really that interested in it.*  
55+, Measured



# Suggestions around messaging emphasise the need to keep it clear and simple – focus on the immediate personal impact that sewage flooding can cause.

## What are the key things to highlight in communications around sewage flooding?

1

**Keep it simple and focus on the misery that blocked pipes cause**, not only in terms of the stress and financial cost but also potential damage that it can cause to your home and possessions

2

**Make the personal and community impact clear** – your actions don't just have an impact on you but also on your neighbours and the wider community. It's a selfish act when you don't dispose of items properly

3

**The potential health implications for those concerned could be serious** - this is seen to be a particularly prevalent topic and is something that people are increasingly more aware of and comfortable talking about it

*Focus on the personal impact. For instance if you do this it will cost you money. It will block your pipes. Stop doing it and save yourself some trouble. That seems like a sensible message.*

35-54, Measured

*'This could cost you a lot of money,' might be an effective campaign. I noticed all those stop the block ones tend to be, this takes 100 years to decompose. The other one is, don't suffer the misery of blocked pipes, which I think is probably the better way to go.*

35-54, Measured

**Despite the impact that sewage flooding has on the environment being clear it was suggested that messaging should instead focus on the personal / immediate impact. Those who care about the wider environment are likely to not be the target audience.**

At the same time, one customer suggested that it can be difficult to change the habits of older homeowners, and as a teacher, pointed to the focus on environmental issues, **particularly in younger children and teenagers**. Early education about how such systems work can lead to younger people educating their parents, and with a knock on effect on their own behaviours as they mature and become responsible in their own homes.

# The WaterTalk panel

- Water Talk is an online community designed to reflect the views of those in the North West who have access to the internet (circa 90% of the population)
- Customer panels typically provide a deeper level of engagement with customers than ad-hoc pieces of research
- It provides rapid research access to UU customers
  - This can provide fast and cost effective feedback on a wide range of issues
- Where appropriate, work is supported with other methodologies and samples to represent those not present on WaterTalk
- Over 7,000 UU customers are on the panel:
  - 2,600 have taken part in a research activity in the last 6 months