



NJUG CASE STUDY

CASE STUDY 69 : Thames Water & Optimise: Creating communication best practice for emergency projects

Winner of the NJUG 2013 Communications Award

The National Joint Utilities Group (NJUG) is the UK industry association representing utilities solely on street works issues. The 38 utility companies and 18 contractors¹ we represent are major contributors to economic growth, and work to deliver gas, electricity, water and telecommunications to both individual consumers and UK plc.

NJUG members need to continue to drive forward further improvements. We have therefore developed the NJUG Vision for Street Works, which revolves around six main principles:

1. Safety is the number one priority
2. Utilities deliver consistent high quality
3. Utilities work together and in partnership with local authorities and contractors to minimise disruption
4. Utilities keep the public informed on all aspects of works
5. Utilities maximise the use of sustainable methods and materials
6. Damage to the underground assets is avoided

This case study is an example of the road works sector delivering on these principles and turning the vision into reality.

Overview

Utilising both new media and traditional means, Thames Water and Optimise effectively communicated every stage of their works following a major mains burst in Notting Hill Gate to the public. Given the uncertain nature of the scale or timeline of the work, this approach developed a very good relationship with the public.

Case Study

The scenario

The discovery of a number of voids under a busy road in central London, an imminent risk to the public and an unknown solution; it's the stuff of nightmares.



The site, project and communications teams in Thames Water and Optimise worked together to ensure all stakeholders were informed of the issues, aware of progress and had confidence that the solution would be found and implemented as soon as possible. The fast-moving nature of the work meant communications had to be tailored as usual communications methods alone wouldn't be sufficient.



¹NJUG's current members are Energy Networks Association (representing electricity and gas), Water UK (representing all water and wastewater companies), National Grid, Openreach, and Virgin Media. Our associate members are Clancy Docwra, Skanska, Balfour Beatty, Carillion, First Intervention, Laing O'Rourke, Compass, AMEC, Enterprise, Morrison Utility Services, Fastflow Pipeline Services, Kier Group, CLC Ltd, PJ Keary, Murphy Ltd, Murphy Group, Morgan Sindall and SQS. Including members through trade associations, NJUG represents thirty-eight utility companies, eighteen utility contractors.

A new approach

Ideally, a project as potentially disruptive as Notting Hill Gate would have a communications risk assessment and a full end-to-end communications plan. But the emergency nature of the burst main, and its effect on the ground under the road, meant that the team had to take a new approach to communications, using more social media and a site team as committed to keeping the public informed as to completing the job.

Face to face communications:

- Two drop-ins were arranged during the day, as the site was mobilising, to target commuters in the area and local businesses, rather than the traditional evening drop-ins for residents.
- The site held an 'open-door' morning once a week at the site office.
- Two site team members were nominated for questions and to give updates to customers.

Traditional media:

- A press release was issued at the start of works and a letter was sent to over 1,200 residents and businesses, communicating that there was no way of telling how long the project would take at this stage, but that further updates would be provided regularly.
- Further press releases were issued during the works, culminating in an announcement that the works were complete.
- Updates were posted on the fencing around the site to explain the issue and give updates.

Digital media:

- A dedicated [webpage](#) was created to explain the cause of road closures and give updates.
- A YouTube [video](#) made by the Thames Water Press Office and starring the project Site Agent explaining the works.
- A text message service was set up to give regular updates - over 600 people signed up.

Dedicated team

The project team ensured decisions could be made in a daily call, with actions implemented immediately. Representatives also attended weekly meetings with The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, London Underground Limited and National Grid to retain support, and ensure project progress and collaboration to complete works during the road closure.

Results

The project started at the beginning of May 2013 and was completed at the end of July 2013. It was completed ahead of the final schedule with no accidents or incidents, with work mainly taking place 16 – 18 hours a day, seven days a week.

During the three-month road closure five written commendations, one enquiry and one written complaint were received, and of the nine phone contacts received, there were eight complaints and one enquiry. This is a significant achievement, given that thousands of people were inconvenienced every day, and the figures clearly demonstrate the effectiveness of the team's efforts.



The emergency scheme communication model has proved to be very successful and has been used on other emergency projects in high profile areas. Thames and Optimise kept the public fully informed on all aspects of works - even in times of extreme pressure and short timescales.

