

COMMUNICATING TO STAKEHOLDERS AND CUSTOMERS CRITICAL IN STORMY TIMES

R. Hughes, Watercare Services Ltd, Remuera, Auckland

ABSTRACT (500 WORDS MAXIMUM)

At Watercare we provide water and wastewater services for 1.7 million Aucklanders. In the space of three weeks over January and February 2023, the city suffered both a record-breaking flood and a devastating cyclone. The city's water and wastewater infrastructure took a hammering with landslips breaking watermains and wastewater pipes, and some large wastewater pump stations overflowing after being completely flooded.

We knew from experience with other major weather events that it was crucial to get information out to our customers quickly and to provide regular updates. This paper will outline how we rolled out a multi-channel communication strategy that harnessed the strength of our relationships with key stakeholders. Social media was a key channel that we used to share targeted messaging to impacted communities, to reassure our wider customer base in these uncertain times and to drive customers to our website for the latest updates. Our communications and customer teams worked 24/7 to ensure customers received timely and accurate responses to any queries. With Auckland's water supply in a fragile state after the extreme weather events, it was also crucial to plan ahead for any issues that may arise.

Our commitment to providing accessible, clear and authentic communication did not go unnoticed. We had customers proactively contacting our senior leaders to acknowledge the quality of the communication, including one who noted the emails he'd received were "right up there with the best common sense and informative notices I've seen from utility agencies in a long time. As in probably ever." Elected members also noted our proactive communication in public forums. Our communication during the flood has also influenced our customer trust score, which has been on an upwards trend since.

This paper will explore the insights we received from our survey of customers who had been impacted by the flood or cyclone:

- 89.2% felt they got the information they needed
- 81.3% said they trust us to solve any problems that arise

- 78.3% agreed that we care about our communities

The paper will share the challenges we faced and what communication approaches worked well, while acknowledging the hiccups we experienced along the way, and identifying opportunities for improvement.

Above all, it will showcase how important it is to communicate clearly and often, target the most impacted customers directly, and leverage your stakeholder networks to share important messages in anxious times.

KEYWORDS

Flood, cyclone, crisis, communication, customers, stakeholders, media, social media,

PRESENTER PROFILE

Rachel Hughes has a strong interest in the water industry, having held communications positions at Watercare for 15 years. Prior to Watercare, she sharpened her media relations skills by working at major hospitals in New Zealand and the United Kingdom. Outside of work, Rachel is busy with three young children.

INTRODUCTION

At Watercare, we provide water and wastewater services to 1.7 million Aucklanders. In the space of three weeks over January and February 2023, the region suffered both a record-breaking flood and a devastating cyclone:

- **Auckland Anniversary Flood on Friday 27 January:** 71mm of rain fell in a single hour, with 200mm over 12 hours. This caused devastating flooding and landslides that claimed the lives of four people in the city.
- **Cyclone Gabrielle on Tuesday 14 February:** strong winds and heavy rain caused power and communications outages as well as surface flooding and slips. In the Waitākere Ranges, home to five water storage dams, up to 280mm of rain fell over a three-day period. In the Hūnua Ranges, home to a further five water storage dams, up to 200mm of rain fell over the same period.

These two events saw the region's water and wastewater infrastructure take a hammering, causing more than 150 issues across our networks. We knew from experience with other severe weather events that it was crucial to get information to our stakeholders and customers quickly. This paper outlines how

we rolled out timely communication to stakeholders and customers using every channel available to us.



Image 1: A road in Auckland flooding on the night of Friday 27 January.

IMPACT OF WEATHER EVENTS ON INFRASTRUCTURE

On the evening of Friday 27 January 2023, the start of Auckland Anniversary Weekend, 71mm of rain fell in a single hour and 200mm fell over 12 hours. Given heavy rainfall is deemed to be 100mm over 24-hours, the intensity of the storm was indisputable. Within hours, Auckland Mayor Wayne Brown had declared a state of local emergency in response to the immediate damage, displacement and disruption. At Watercare, the impact would become clear to us over the hours, days and weeks that followed:

- A slip in west Auckland broke a 30-metre-long section of transmission watermain, causing about 3000 homes to be without water for up to five days.
- Slips into the water supply dams saw the level of turbidity (muddiness) rise, limiting the volume of water we could treat.
- One water treatment plant in Pukekohe was completely flooded and remains offline.

- Ten major wastewater pump stations were completely flooded, affecting their pumps and electrical systems.
- About 100 local wastewater pipes were broken by landslides.

While we were still responding to the flooding event, we became aware of Cyclone Gabrielle tracking towards New Zealand. With time on our side, we prepared by:

- Standing up two incident teams to monitor the situation in shifts, 24/7.
- Ensuring a large contingent of staff, contractors, and subcontractors were ready to respond as the situation unfolded.
- Ensuring critical water treatment plants were staffed 24/7.
- Sandbagging critical assets to minimise impact from flooding and tidal surges.
- Ensuring generators were ready for deployment.

These proactive actions meant we put our best foot forward, but we were not immune to the cyclone's impact. While the Government declared a state of national emergency in response to devastation across the motu, in Auckland:

- The water source, treatment plant and storage reservoir at Muriwai – a small beach community – were damaged by a landslide and remain offline.
- Three further water treatment plants (Helensville, Wellsford and Huia Village) shut down temporarily due to water quality, process, communications and/or power issues.
- Numerous local wastewater pump stations shut down temporarily due to power outages.
- The quality of the water in our dams deteriorated further due to slips.



Image 2: Lower Nihotupu Dam in the Waitākere Ranges was affected by slips, causing the level of turbidity to rise.

Watercare had stood up an incident response team ahead of the Auckland Anniversary Flood. While the initial team consisted of operational staff, it was quickly escalated to a full-scale response with representatives from across the business. Fulfilling the public information management position in the CIMS structure, the communications team worked to understand what was happening in the network, how it impacted customers and the environment, and how we needed people to respond.

UNDERSTANDING OUR STAKEHOLDERS AND CUSTOMERS

Watercare is many things: a council-controlled organisation; a major infrastructure provider; and a service provider to 1.7 million people. This means we have vast stakeholder networks and a commitment to engage with different groups.

- **Elected members:** In Auckland, more than 150 people serve as councillors or local board members. They have deep roots into their communities which means they can be very effective at sharing our information as well as providing us with local insights and feedback. After the storm events, they received stakeholder updates from our elected member engagement team, who would respond to any follow-up queries.
- **Auckland Emergency Management and Auckland Council officers:** With states of local and national emergency declared, Auckland Emergency Management was activated. They received our stakeholder updates as well as media statements. They would include our key messages in their external updates as well as share our social media posts.
- **Infrastructure partners and suppliers:** We have many large-scale infrastructure partners as well as 1000+ suppliers. They received stakeholder updates from our procurement team to share with their staff.
- **Mana Whenua Kaitiaki Forum:** This is a governance forum of the 19 hapū and iwi authorities of Tāmaki Makaurau. They received our stakeholder updates from our iwi liaison team.
- **Community:** We provide services to 1.7 million people in Auckland. They received our updates through the media, stakeholder networks and website. For social media, we covered all bases by boosting posts on our pages and also posting in relevant community pages.
- **Customers:** Of the 1.7 million people who receive our services, we have contact information (email and/or mobile) for about 282,000 bill payers. They received emails and/or text messages if their services were directly impacted.
- **Priority assistance:** Some of our customers need a little extra support. They may be sight or hearing impaired, require a translator, or undertake

home dialysis. We maintain an active database of these customers so we can call them if there is a service disruption impacting their house.

- **Board of directors and senior leadership team:** They received our stakeholder updates and were encouraged to share information with staff and external contacts.
- **Staff:** They received staff-specific updates, often with health, safety, and welfare messages, and could read stories on our response efforts on our intranet.

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

In an emergency it is vital for an organisation to stay in control of its narrative – this helps it to manage the short-term response while protecting its long-term reputation. To do this, an organisation must be proactive and release timely information to stakeholders and customers through easy-to-access channels. If it fails to do this, misinformation and rumour may fill the void in the media and on social media.

In the early hours of Saturday 28 January, the incident team came together to discuss the impact of the storm on Watercare's water and wastewater operations. From a communications perspective, the priority on that morning – and in every briefing thereafter – was to:

- understand the impact on our water and wastewater networks
- understand the impact on our customers and environment
- identify if there were actions that staff, stakeholders and/or customers needed to take.

With an evolving situation, we could never wait for a perfect, all-encompassing status report. Instead, we committed to regularly releasing the best information we had available at the time. At times, we would have to amend information from one update to the next. Our stakeholders accepted this, without criticism.

This information was emailed directly to stakeholders and published on our website. Aucklanders were guided to the information using social media posts as well as customer text messages and emails. This delivered a win-win: Aucklanders could self-serve and there was less pressure on our contact centre. In the first few days following the Auckland Anniversary Floods, the web page received more than 40,000 hits.

TACTICAL ROLLOUT

Within 12 hours of the Auckland Anniversary Weekend downpour, we had rolled out a multi-channel communications response. The team was split into two, running shifts to cover the incident 24/7.

- **Website:** By 7:30am on Saturday 28 January, we had published a section on the website that became our 'source of truth'. It was updated several times a day over the two months that followed, as new information became available.
- **Emails to stakeholders:** By 8:30am on Saturday 28 January, we had sent our first stakeholder update. Between then and 1 March, we sent a further 30 updates outlining the impact on our infrastructure, customers, and environment. We included calls for action, encouraging recipients to share our key messages and social media posts. With each update, new information was highlighted to ensure recipients could quickly scan the email.
- **Posts and engagements on social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter):** Our social media response started during the downpour on Friday 27 January when we encouraged people to stay clear of floodwaters. By 8:30am on Saturday 28 January, we were using social media to provide headline information and direct people to our website for further information. Our key messages were that the water was safe to drink; to stay clear of floodwaters; to contact emergency services if you are in danger; and to use water wisely.

While key messages generally applied across Auckland, there was a high volume of targeted posts dealing with local issues. For example, in west Auckland – where several thousand homes were without water for up to five days – we posted water tanker updates in community pages. In this way, we were reaching people through their trusted local sources of information, rather than expecting them to seek out information from us.

Social media is a two-way channel. While we were actively sending out information – with more than 400 posts in three weeks – we were also monitoring and responding to community comments. Often people would alert us to issues through social media, which we would pass on to our operations team.

- **Updates to media:** Each day, we provided key messages for Auckland Emergency Management to include in their media standup. We also responded to numerous media queries in the days, weeks and months following the storms.
- **Emails to customers:** We emailed customers for whom we have contact information about local issues, often with a specific call to action such as reducing their water use.
- **Texts to customers:** We sent text messages to customers experiencing water supply issues on an as-required basis. This reduced pressure on our customer service agents.
- **Internal storytelling:** We published several articles on our internal intranet acknowledging and celebrating the hard work of staff and contractors in responding to the emergency.

Commented [MV1]: do you mean weeks?

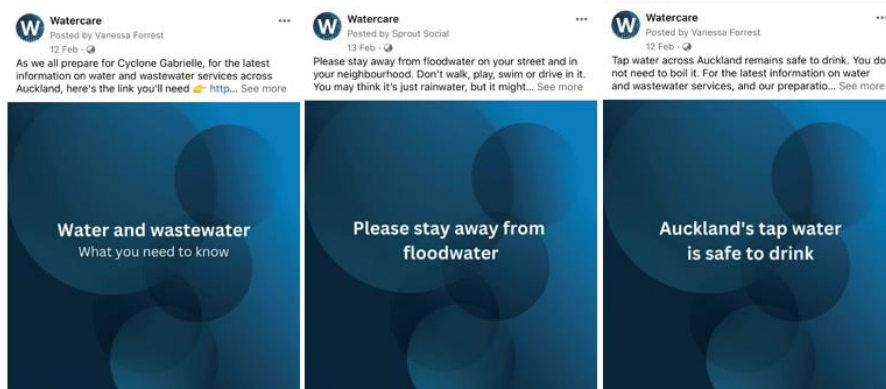
Commented [RH2R1]: No, Vanessa says it was over a couple of months.

RECOGNISING THE POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA

In 2017, Auckland experienced a severe storm that was labelled the 'Tasman Tempest'. At that time, Watercare did not have a social media presence and relied solely on the mainstream media. Six years later, the company has a dedicated digital content team that played a key role in the communications response.

Over the space of three weeks, we published more than 400 posts across our three channels and hundreds more posts in community groups. Audience growth was 4,300 and engagement with our posts went up by 675%.

The tone of our messaging was friendly – we aimed to bring a little light relief where we could while still being respectful of the situation that many people were in. It was a delicate line, but we were happy to tread it.



Images 3 and 4: Examples of social media posts: while some captured attention

with quirky images, others delivered key messages in a consistent, branded manner.

ISSUES MANAGEMENT

In the period following the flooding and cyclone, we proactively prepared for issues that *may* arise while also responding to issues that *did* arise.

Our 2017 experience with the Tasman Tempest taught us that extreme weather events can impact the quality of the water in our dams, reducing the volume we can treat and supply to customers. With this in mind, we prepared a full 'reduce your water use immediately' campaign that we could roll out with short notice. It included a media release, email to customers, text and IVR messaging and social media posts. We commissioned aerial photography of our dams and engaged an advertising agency to produce a 30-second radio advert. Thankfully, we did not need to roll this out regionwide – however a lot of the messaging was put to use in communities served by smaller water treatment plants that temporarily shut down due to power or water quality issues.



Image 5: Watercare environmental assets manager James Talbot surveys the impact of the flood on water storage dams in the Waitākere Ranges. The photography was commissioned shortly after the flood in order to show the public the scale of devastation, motivating them to do their bit by reducing their water use.

The Auckland Anniversary Floods caused a landslide on Scenic Drive in west Auckland that washed away a 30-metre-long section of transmission watermain. This caused several thousand houses to be without water. While the operational team was able to implement short-term measures to restore service within a week, the measures were not foolproof. Therefore, a plan to reconfigure the wider supply network was prepared. This network reconfiguration had the potential to cause widespread discolouration of the water.

We alerted the community to the work ahead of time. Our key messages covered three areas: why the work was necessary; how customers can prepare; and what customers should do if their water was discoloured. Our messaging was distributed through direct emails to customers, social media, mainstream media, stakeholder updates and the website. Afterwards, we received a lot of positive feedback from the community, who were thankful for our mahi – both in terms of the advance notice and the operational change.

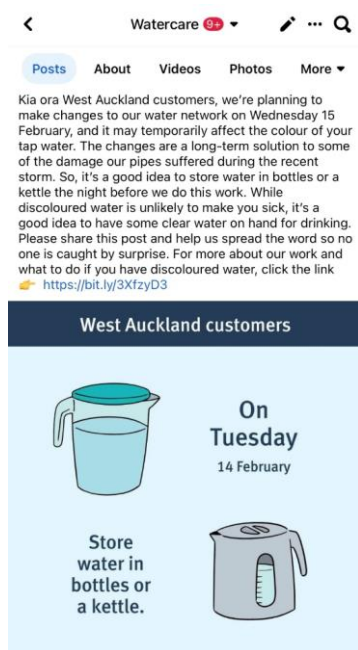


Image 6: Example of a social media post giving people advance notice of work to reconfigure the water network.

LEARNING FROM AUSTRALIAN WATER COMPANIES

While we were responding to the storm, our customer insights team took the opportunity to get in touch with water utilities in Australia, who had recently dealt with severe floods. They shared their learnings about what worked and what didn't work, some of which we were able to immediately integrate into our

response. For example, we promptly reassured customers whose homes were uninhabitable that we would pause their fixed charges for six months and provide them with free water for cleaning in and around their properties. This was well received by those customers.

BUMPS ALONG THE WAY

During our emergency response, the operations team asked us to encourage people to report issues with their local networks so they could resolve them. We quickly responded to this by posting on social media. Unfortunately, Aucklanders heeded the call to action in large numbers and overwhelmed the contact centre.

This led staff to brainstorm a better way to gather the information. Within hours, we had sent out a text to customers in impacted areas with a link to a simple survey. They were very engaged and around 2,000 people responded promptly. The results could be interpreted and presented to operations quickly – with no impact on the contact centre. This learning was valuable and will be used in future emergency situations.

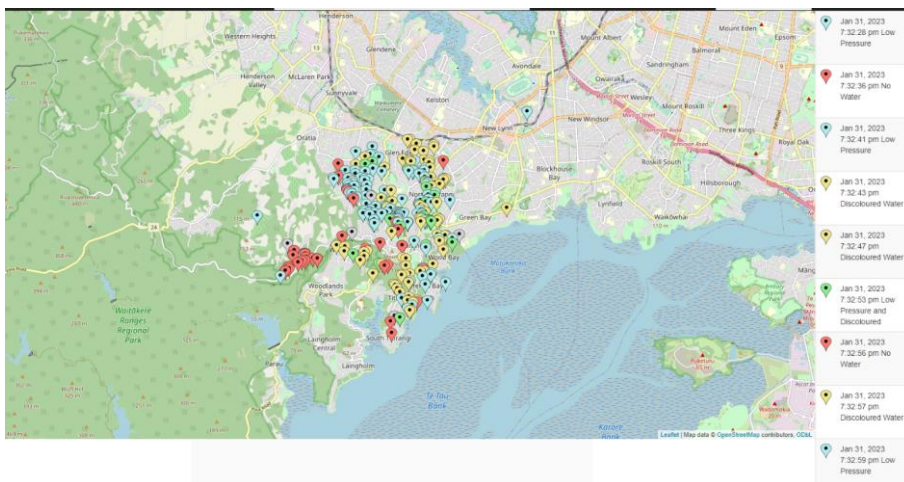


Image 7: The results from the survey were able to be plotted onto a map, giving the operations team the ability to see where the issues were very quickly.

RESULTS

Shortly after Cyclone Gabrielle, we surveyed customers who had been impacted by the storms to see how they felt we handled the situation:

- 89.2% felt they got the information they needed

- 81.3% said they trust Watercare to solve any problems that arise
- 78.3% agreed that Watercare cares about its communities.

One respondent commented: *"Watercare has been by FAR the best services company for info flow - honest, transparent info that lets me make good decisions."*

Social media interaction skyrocketed during this time, with over 400 published posts, 220,000 engagements and a net audience growth of more than 4200 across Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

One Facebook user, responding to a post that informed west Auckland customers that they no longer needed to save water, said: *"Well done Watercare. Plenty of timely communication and talented staff who performed the physical work in an efficient manner."*

Proactive targeted communication with key messages and a link to the website meant many impacted customers did not need to contact us, and our contact centre was able to handle the increased volume of queries and reported faults. The average wait time for the contact centre increased from 3 minutes to 10 minutes, despite the widespread issues we faced across the city.

One customer who had received emails warning him of potential discolouration in the water when we carried out essential work, sent a message to our chief customer officer on LinkedIn saying: *"Just a note to say that the emails (two I believe) are right up there with the best common sense and informative notices I've seen from utility agencies in a long time. As in probably ever."*

Watercare was mentioned in more than 300 media reports related to the flood or cyclone, and achieved an average media impact score of 3.2 for this coverage, which means the overwhelming majority of the messaging was positive. The leading messages in this coverage were that our water supply was reliable and resilient to the changing climate. To put this media impact score in perspective, a score of 1.5 is considered a good score for a competent organisation in touch with its coverage.

In the six months since the storms, the percentage of Aucklanders who trust Watercare has held steady at around 63%. This is based on a monthly survey of 400+ people.

CONCLUSIONS

We know further extreme weather events are inevitable. Our experience in responding to two consecutive storms has reinforced the value of early and regular communications to stakeholders and customers that helped us control the narrative.

Critical to the success of our response was having:

- Experienced communications staff who understood their roles within an incident response team
- Well established communications channels
- Pre-existing relationships with stakeholders and iwi partners
- The ability to contact many customers directly through text messages or emails
- The ability to reach Aucklanders through Watercare and community social media pages
- The foresight to plan ahead for emerging issues so we could respond immediately if necessary
- Having relationships with water utilities in Australia who shared learnings that we could apply to our incident response in real-time.

Key learnings included:

- The value of using direct communication (text messages and email) to reduce the pressure on our contact centre
- The value of using targeted customer surveys to flush out local network issues, rather than asking people to report faults via our contact centre or website.

Effective communication is a vital component of any incident response. In this instance, we were able to maintain public trust in Watercare and protect the company's reputation.