

Thames Water in Camden

Impact on Fitzrovia

Background

Thames Water has admitted its performance has been “unacceptable” in recent years¹. The water regulator OFWAT, in its *Water company performance report 2022-23* stated that, in performance terms, Thames Water was “Lagging behind – several companies remain in this category from 2021-22 – Southern Water, Thames Water, Yorkshire Water, and Dŵr Cymru”. In terms of the company’s approach to street works, Thames Water was recently fined 350 times in four years for over-running works by a west London council.² Negative media coverage has been unrelenting.

Fitzrovia

Fitzrovia is the north-west quadrant of the W1 postal district, partly in Camden and partly in Westminster. It was originally laid out and developed in the late 18th century and completed by the mid-19th century. Its water infrastructure has, therefore, typically been in the ground for 100-150 years. Many parts of central London will have water pipes which are this age or older.

Thames Water admits its infrastructure is very old. Its executives regularly use the word ‘Victorian’ to describe mains and other assets. The company recently stated: “Work is now underway to replace 112km of water distribution mains and seven large trunk mains across the city”.³ This statement sounds significant, except that there are 275km of roads (most of which have water mains) in Camden alone, and 14700km of roads across London⁴.

In their evidence to Camden’s Culture and Environment Scrutiny Committee of 22 January 2024, Thames Water has included a map of ‘Distribution Main Investment’, which shows that in the 2020-2025 asset management period, only one street in Fitzrovia is to see investment before 2026.

Because of the age of both the water and sewage networks, leaks affect both. Sometimes, as in Belsize Lane (NW3), mains burst causing significant damage. In

¹ ‘Thames Water boss brands performance ‘unacceptable’ during river quality inquiry’, *ITVX*, 13 October 2021, <https://www.itv.com/news/london/2021-10-13/thames-water-boss-brands-performance-unacceptable-during-river-quality-inquiry> Also: ‘Thames Water to pay back £65m to customers as part of leaks penalty’, *The Guardian*, 7 June 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/jun/07/thames-water-to-pay-65m-back-to-customers-as-part-of-penalty-package>

² Thames Water fined 350 times in four years by Richmond Council, *BBC News*, 10 February 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-64595911>

³ ‘Thames Water commits an additional £700m to improve water supplies’ Thames Water press release, 11 May 2023, <https://www.thameswater.co.uk/news/thames-water-commits-700-million-to-improve-water-supplies>

⁴ Source: Department for Transport, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/road-length-statistics-rdl>

Fitzrovia, there are frequent bursts (of varying sizes) leading to between 100 and 150 Thames Water road openings in the area each year. In Fitzrovia currently (22 January 2024) there are Thames Water projects to fix leaks at Richardsons Mews, Tottenham Street, Goodge Street, Store Street and (in Westminster) Wells Street. These can all be viewed on 'one.network.org'.

Fitzrovia (including both boroughs' sections) covers an area of about a quarter of a square mile. Greater London is a city of 600 square miles. Thus, if Thames Water's need to mend leaks in Fitzrovia were to be replicated across the whole of the city (accepting that some parts are not supplied by Thames Water), it would - pro rata - amount to between 240,000 and 360,000 projects per year. This implies the condition of Thames Water's infrastructure in Fitzrovia is uniquely problematic.

Goodge Street provides a case study of the problem. There have been regular (and several major) Thames Water projects (two affecting sewers, the remainder water leaks) on this street since January 2023: in February, March (three times), May, July, October, December (twice) and January (twice). That is, eleven separate projects within an eleven-month period. Most of these have required the full closure of what is an 'A' road.

As recently as last Friday evening (19th January) there was yet another major burst at a point on Goodge Street (close to the junction with Cleveland Street) where there have been four major leaks within seven weeks. This project is on-going.

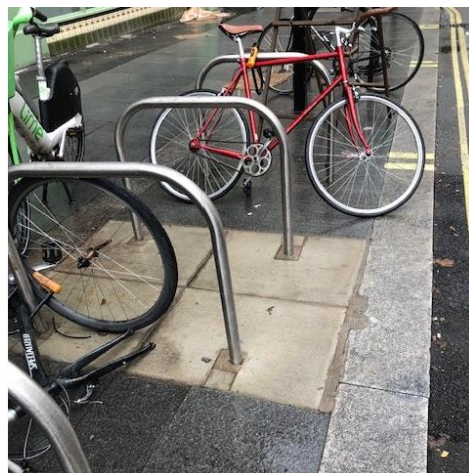
Quality of reinstatements

Given the number of Thames Water projects undertaken in Fitzrovia, the quality of reinstatement work is essential. Yet often the standard falls short of regulatory requirements. The photographs below show examples of how high-quality surfacing in Goodge Street has been replaced by cheaper alternatives by Thames Water's contractors. Each site, where work was undertaken in early 2023, has been left in this condition for more than six months.

Setts replaced by tarmac concrete blocks



West End project paving replaced by



Impact on residents and businesses

The condition of Thames Water's assets in Fitzrovia has led to repeated 'emergency' works, works undertaken 'out of hours' (even when not an emergency), and projects left unattended for days or weeks at a time. The scale of the interventions, running at 100 to 150 projects a year, is unreasonable and suggestive of a need for a better approach. In a high-density neighbourhood, the impact of so many road works on residents and businesses is profound.

Proposals

Camden might consider acting with other local authorities to incentivise Thames Water by making the case for (i) significant 'lane rental' charges for all road and pavement works; (ii) fines for over-running projects; (iii) penalties for work undertaken out-of-hours as an emergency (this would incentivise a reduction in such failures); and (iv) the power for councils to step in and complete reinstatements and charge the costs to the relevant utilities.