

Private sewer transfer: the councils aren't clear

Research shows that councils preparing for transfer of private sewers are confused and concerned about how future environmental health issues will be resolved. **Marie-Claire Kidd** reports on behalf of UK Drainage Protocol

Councils gearing up for transfer of private shared drainage to water and sewerage companies say WaSCs must communicate better and Defra's position must be clearer if transfer is to work. New research shows that council officers, who currently have powers to ensure homeowners repair defective private shared drainage when it threatens health, are uncertain about how transfer will be managed, and whether standards will be maintained by water and sewerage companies (WaSCs).

The survey, carried out by shared drainage specialist UK Drainage Protocol (UKDP), shows councils need reassurance that WaSCs will take full responsibility for drainage issues post-transfer. And it reveals that councils, and even individuals within councils, have vastly different opinions about how issues will be resolved.

UKDP, which worked on behalf of 47 councils across England and Wales in 2010, co-ordinates the parties involved in domestic shared drainage issues, providing an alternative to enforcement action by councils against groups of homeowners. It spoke to 151 professionals, representing 126 of the environmental health, pollution and specialist drainage teams at the sharp end of shared drainage in England and Wales. It found 87% regard transfer, which is expected to begin in October, as positive, and 83% believe residents will benefit. Officers expect to spend less time on drainage cases post-transfer, but believe they should retain enforcement powers where persistent problems threaten health. When asked whether they should retain the ability to serve legal notice, 78% replied "yes".

There was confusion about retention of these powers. When asked whether they were aware of enforcement powers post-transfer, 18% said "yes", 53% "no", and 29% did not know. When rating their council's relationship with the relevant WaSC, most replied "average" or "good", 6% said "poor" and one respondent described the relationship as "very poor". Thirteen respondents said they had an excellent relationship with their WaSC. When asked whether they thought their WaSC was prepared for transfer, 59% said "don't know". Some commented there had been little communication that could have informed them. Thirty-four per cent thought their WaSC was prepared with some areas to address, and 15% thought they were not prepared at all. Issues around ownership, communication, curtilage and mapping should be of high importance for WaSCs, according to most respondents.

Over half thought their council was prepared for transfer with some areas to address. Areas the majority felt were of high importance include setting up a working process with their WaSC and improving communication with their WaSC. Interestingly, handover of information was not seen as highly important by the majority of respondents. Despite this, over three quarters (78%) said information held within their council would be relevant to WaSCs. Around the same percentage (75%) said WaSCs had not approached them about transferring data.

Less than a quarter believe the data has financial value, suggesting they would share it without charge. Some respondents commented that councils should share information purely to resolve future issues, not for financial gain, and that valuing it would be difficult and impractical.

There is also concern about service delivery. Most believe transfer will reduce confusion and that most residents will gratefully relinquish



A residents' meeting in Plymouth in January where UKDP's technical director, James Warren, presented findings of a private sewer survey carried out in partnership with contractor CET

financial liability, but there is concern that WaSCs will be unable to cope with increasing demand, or deal with detailed, sensitive domestic issues within acceptable timescales.

Despite protracted discussion on the volume of pipework and enquiries WaSCs will inherit post-transfer, there is still uncertainty about whether current cases under legal notice will be transferred and, if they are, where liability will rest. Nearly two-thirds (66%) of respondents believe homeowners will leave repairs on current issues until after transfer. If they are right, WaSCs could inherit a plethora of issues requiring immediate attention. When asked which methods were most effective when communicating with homeowners, council officers favoured face-to-face and written communication (74% and 72% respectively). Less than half (43%) said telephone responses were similarly effective, suggesting call centres alone would not be sufficient, and more personal methods should be available. Councils were asked whether a formal protocol would be required to agree ways of working between all parties. Eighty-three per cent agreed, but there was concern over how this would be implemented.

Sam Warren of UKDP says: "We undertook this research because we were constantly being asked for information on the transfer by councils, and many felt their views weren't being considered. The results can aid decision making and help WaSCs and councils establish working practices that will benefit the industry and consumers.

"In councils, transfer is seen as positive, but there's concern around how required service levels will be delivered, and how WaSCs will manage increased workload and communication with customers and others involved. There's still uncertainty. People need more information. A formal protocol, similar to the current drainage protocol established by insurers, would agree a process and define guidelines within which to work, ultimately delivering cost efficiencies for WaSCs and customer satisfaction for homeowners."

The full results can be seen at www.ukdrainageprotocol.com