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An Epsom and Ewell education in water shortage

18 December 2024



The residents of Epsom, Ewell, Stoneleigh, and surrounding areas have been grappling with a significant water supply crisis over the past 48 hours, following a major failure in the infrastructure of SES Water. The disruption, which began on Monday afternoon, has left families struggling with basic necessities, businesses hampered, and schools forced to close early for the Christmas break.

What Happened?

SES Water has attributed the disruption to the failure of a critical valve in their network. Ian Cain, Chief Executive of SES Water, stated that the issue is being addressed by teams working around the clock. While efforts are being made to restore supplies, the company has warned that normal service may take another 24 hours as water quality tests are conducted to ensure safety.

Despite these reassurances, the community has expressed frustration with what many perceive as vague and inconsistent updates from the water provider. Bottled water stations have been set up at four locations, but long queues and limited access have left some residents resorting to supermarket purchases to meet their needs.

Impact on Residents

For many, the water outage has caused significant upheaval in their daily lives. Basic tasks such as showering, cooking, and cleaning have become a challenge.

Rebecca Johnson, a mother of two from Epsom, shared her experience:
“It’s been incredibly difficult. We’ve had to rely on bottled water for everything, even brushing our teeth. My youngest has eczema, and not being able to bathe him properly has made it worse. This isn’t just an inconvenience; it’s affecting our health.”

Local businesses have also been hit hard. A café owner in Sutton lamented the loss of customers:
“Without water, we can’t wash dishes, cook, or even make coffee. We’ve had to shut our doors during what should be a busy pre-Christmas period.”

School Closures

One of the most striking consequences of the outage has been the early closure of Nonsuch High School for Girls. Headteacher Mrs. Williamson-Jones described the decision as unavoidable:
“With no water for toilets, heating, or cooking, it was impossible to maintain a safe environment for our students and staff. This disruption will have a lasting impact on the education of 1,500 girls.”

Parents have expressed concern about the loss of learning days and the difficulties of last-minute childcare arrangements.

Political Response

Local MP Helen Maguire has taken a firm stance, labelling the situation “completely unacceptable.” In her press release, she detailed her ongoing communication with SES Water, including discussions with Ian Cain, and criticised the company’s lack of transparency.

“Families deserve clear and timely updates, and this has been sorely lacking,” she stated. Maguire has also raised broader concerns about the resilience of the local water infrastructure and called for an investigation to prevent future crises.

A Global Perspective

While the situation in Epsom has highlighted the vulnerabilities of local water infrastructure, it also serves as a stark reminder of the global water crisis. According to the United Nations, 26% of the world’s population—around 2 billion people—lack access to safe drinking water in their homes.

In countries such as Yemen, Ethiopia, and India, millions face daily struggles to secure clean water for drinking, cooking, and washing. Prolonged droughts, overextraction of groundwater, and pollution exacerbate these challenges. The World Health Organization estimates that 829,000 people die annually from diseases caused by unsafe water, sanitation, and hygiene.

The water shortage in Epsom and Ewell, while temporary, offers a glimpse into the hardships endured by billions

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worldwide. It underscores the importance of robust infrastructure and efficient resource management to ensure equitable water access.

Calls for Accountability

For Epsom and Ewell residents, the immediate concern is the restoration of their water supply. However, the crisis has also raised questions about SES Water's preparedness and reliability. Recent increases in water bills have further fuelled dissatisfaction, with many questioning whether they are getting value for money.

Local resident Mark Stevens voiced the concerns of many:
"We're paying more, but the service keeps getting worse. This outage has shown just how fragile our water system is. SES Water needs to be held accountable."

Helen Maguire MP has pledged to continue pressing the company for answers and solutions. She has also urged SES Water to prioritise vulnerable residents and ensure that support reaches those most in need.

Moving Forward

As the community waits for normal service to resume, there is a growing demand for action. Residents and businesses alike are calling for a thorough review of SES Water's operations, improved communication during emergencies, and long-term investments in infrastructure.

The local water crisis has been a sobering experience for many, highlighting both local vulnerabilities and global inequalities in water access. While the immediate challenge is to restore supply, it is clear that the lessons learned must inform future planning and policy to prevent similar disruptions and ensure water security for all.

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