



Drinking Water Quality Regulator
for Scotland

Consumer Complaint Determination

Taste and Odour

5 August 2014

DWQR Inspector:
Matt Bower

Basis of complaint

Since at least 2012, the water supply has had an unpleasant taste, making it difficult to consume water as required for medical reasons

Context of Investigation

Mrs S contacted DWQR to request an investigation into a taste that affected her water, to the extent that it made it difficult to drink. This made life difficult for Mrs S as she needs to consume large quantities of water for medical reasons. The taste has been described, on different occasions, as Earthy / Musty and Chlorine.

An extensive chain of communication between Mrs S and Scottish Water has taken place, with Scottish Water having visited Mrs S' property on a number of occasions since 2012 and having taken 9 sets of samples between February 2012 and February 2014. All samples have met the required standard for taste and odour, and no substances which could be responsible for imparting a taste to the water have been detected.

Scottish Water provided the consumer with bottled water in February and had replenished this on a regular basis, with the company noting, at one point, that there were 39 cases of bottled water at Mrs S' back door. In March, following completion of further analysis, Scottish Water wrote to Mrs S explaining that all sample results had been satisfactory and the company considered that there was no further analysis which would be helpful in investigating the complaint. No further bottled water was provided.

DWQR Assessment of complaint and the actions taken

It is evident that Scottish Water has visited the consumer on a number of occasions, usually resulting in a water sample being taken for analysis. On the first occasion, no taste and odour samples were taken, and a further visit was required in order to collect these. Taste and odour was analysed in samples taken from Mrs S' property on 8 occasions, and each time no taste or odour was detected, other than a slight chlorine taste / odour on one occasion.

DWQR notes that Mrs S' neighbours complained to Scottish Water about taste and odour in March 2014. Apparently in response to this, Scottish Water undertook a small sample survey from other properties in the area, with no samples recording detectable taste or odour.

From Scottish Water's record of consumer contacts and actions, it is unclear how many times a Scottish Water employee actually tasted the water at Mrs S' property to confirm the presence of a taste or odour on site. The impression gained from the notes is that on most occasions, Scottish Water's visit primarily consisted of taking further samples and dropping off bottled water rather than attempting to investigate on site and understand possible causes of any problem. This, together with Scottish Water's apparent reluctance to take an assertive position once multiple samples had shown no issue, are likely to have prolonged the complaint and confused the consumer without achieving a resolution.

Scottish Water issued bottled water to the consumer on a number of occasions, and it is likely to have partly been the decision to withdraw this that prompted the consumer to contact DWQR. It is understandable that Scottish Water was sympathetic to the consumer's position and concerns about the water, and issued bottled water in an effort to help. This is defensible until such time as sample data demonstrated that the water was safe to drink and there was no evidence of a significant taste or odour to the water. Once this evidence was available, the continued provision of bottled water is less defensible and will only serve to have reinforced the consumer's concern that something was wrong.

At DWQR's request, and in an effort to attempt to establish whether there was any possible root cause to the consumer's perception of taste problems, Scottish Water sent a byelaws inspector to investigate the internal plumbing of Mrs S' property. The report from this visit, whilst failing to find a definitive cause of taste and odour issues, does highlight a number of potential issues that could cause such problems.

Conclusion

DWQR concludes that there is sufficient evidence from sample data that there is no significant problem with the incoming Scottish Water supply to Mrs S' property. It is possible that internal plumbing factors, highlighted by the byelaws inspection, are causing or contributing to a perceived intermittent taste and odour issue, and it is recommended that Mrs S (or her landlord) works to address the issues raised in the inspection report.

DWQR is of the opinion that Scottish Water has tried to help the consumer but has continually failed to investigate her complaint in anything other than a superficial way. It is of concern that, prior to DWQR's involvement, no investigation had been done of the consumer's property. From the notes of Scottish Water visits to the property, there is little evidence that the water was even tasted on-site to confirm or discount the presence of an issue. The repeated sampling and provision of bottled water, while apparently responding to the consumer's immediate concerns, had done nothing to resolve the issue on a longer term basis and has only served to antagonise the consumer.

Recommendations

DWQR recommends that Scottish Water:

1. Reviews its response to taste and odour contacts to enhance the depth of investigation involved and focus on resolution, including a basic examination of consumer's plumbing, with suitable additional training for staff as required;
2. Develops a policy for the issue and withdrawal of bottled water to consumers (or reviews it if one exists already) and briefs staff on implementation;
3. Reminds staff of the need to sample for the correct determinands in response to a consumer contact about taste and odour, or develops a system to improve the communication of sampling requirements following a water quality contact;
4. Reviews the effectiveness of its process for escalating contacts that generate repeated calls from the consumer and visits from Scottish Water staff with no apparent resolution.