

Thames Water in Camden

Impact on Fitzrovia: 2024-25

Background

Thames Water continues to struggle financially. The company is having to spend large sums of money (on lawyers, banks etc) on an attempt to borrow more money to allow it to continue as a going concern. It has admitted on many occasions its performance is poor. In Fitzrovia, and doubtless other parts of Camden, this failure leads to disruptions, damages streetscape and disturbance for residents and businesses.

Warren Street pipe replacement: a case study

The project

Thames Water replaced the water pipes along Warren Street, W1 in an initial three-month period from 15 January to 21 April 2024. The work was done in five sections, moving from east to west and was originally scheduled to be completed on 7 April, but the permit had to be extended until 15 April. The project was then extended to 17 April, then to 19 April and was finally completed on 21 April. Signage was left abandoned in the street after this date, until the company was notified. The project is still not completed, with further reinstatement works scheduled for the weekend of 28 February – 2 March.

Quality of the work undertaken

Camden council officials have monitored the project closely. As a result, four sections of the road: [(1) Tottenham Court Road to Whitfield Street; (2) Whitfield Street to Grafton Mews; (3) Grafton Mews to Fitzroy Street; and (4) Fitzroy Street to Conway Street] have had, in part or in whole, to be reinstated twice. This waste of time and resources (and the resulting noise/pollution nuisance for residents and businesses) resulted from the original new surface being sub-standard. Camden also required at least a dozen of the paving reinstatements to be re-done because the quality of work was below the appropriate quality. Poor quality road markings replaced the original ones. Two examples are provided below:



As reinstated by Thames Water (subsequently re-reinstated)



What they should look like



Before: smooth line



After: random broken line

Warren Street in context

Warren Street is 340 metres long, revealing Thames Water takes a week to deliver 22 metres of pipe replacement in an average street, equivalent to four metres a day. According to the Department for Transport, there are 240km of 'minor' roads in Camden, 277km in Westminster and 44km in the City of London, a total of 561km. Of these, broadly one third (about 180km) will be in central London and thus as old as those in Warren Street or older. Very few have ever been replaced, implying the need for investment on a massive scale. There was no evidence that Warren Street was either better or worse than other local roads in terms of the age of its pipes or their condition.

In 2023, Thames Water announced it had begun work to replace 70 miles (112km) of leaky Victorian pipes across London and the Home Counties at a cost of £700 million.¹ The progress in Warren Street, at four metres per day (perhaps five if Sundays are excluded), alongside recent figures from the company itself, implies the company's pipe infrastructure is depreciating faster than it can replace it.

This will mean more water main bursts of the kind that occurred on Euston Road in October 2024. There were also major water main bursts in Avenue Road (July 2016 and July 2018), Belsize Road (July 2018 and December 2022), Eversholt Street (October 2017, June 2019 and September 2019), West End Lane (January 2020)

The problem is that the company has so under-invested in its elderly asset base since it was created in 1989 that it is inconceivable that it can ever make up for past failures. An endless series of leaks (perhaps 150 to 200 per year in Fitzrovia) and slowly-undertaken repairs is the result. The outcome is bad for residents, business and the environment.

What the Warren Street project tells us

The quality of much of Thames Water's infrastructure in Fitzrovia remains poor. The Warren Street project provides indisputable evidence of poorly-specified work and outcomes. The problem is not a lack of money, but poor-quality management. There are unattended leaks in several Fitzrovia locations.

Thames Water needs to provide a guarantee it will in future deliver better-managed outcomes and more rapidly completed project.

Tony Travers
20 February 2025

¹ 'Work to replace 70 miles of leaky water pipes begins', BBC News, 12 May 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5149y50ydn0#:~:text=Thames%20Water%20has%20begun%20work,capital%20by%2050%25%20by%202030>.