Chapter 26

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THE SUCCESS OF PUBLIC WATER IN BATTLING COVID-19 IN FINLAND

Finnish water supply and sanitation have evolved through many crises. This is the case especially in Tampere, the first industrialized city in Finland, where there have been crises related to sanitation, typhoid, city fires and high infant mortality rates. Tampere is the third-largest city in Finland and the largest inland centre in the Nordic countries. Tampere Water serves as a municipal corporation, with operations managed and steered by a management group that consists of the heads of units in addition to a CEO. An organization of 150 people is responsible for its operating activities. Tampere Water's costs are covered by collecting water and wastewater fees from users. More than 250,000 people live within Tampere Water's operating area. This paper discusses how the Covid-19 crisis has affected water services in Finland, with a focus on Tampere.

INTRODUCTION

On March 16, 2020, the Finnish government announced a state of emergency in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The aim of this action was to protect the population and safeguard the economy.

Persons over 70 years of age were instructed to avoid contact with others. Schools, educational institutions and universities were closed, and contact teaching was suspended and replaced by alternative methods, such as distance learning. Only early childhood education, care units and pre-primary education were allowed to operate. Public gatherings were limited to a maximum of 10 persons. Travelling to and from the Uusimaa region (the Helsinki metropolitan area) was also forbidden, with few exceptions. In early May, the government decided on a hybrid strategy to manage the coronavirus crisis and start lifting the restrictions.

We asked Finnish water utilities to tell us how the pandemic has affected their work. We interviewed seven water utilities in a Zoom meeting in June 2020 and sent a Webropol questionnaire via email to 90 water utilities (of which 20 responded). We had a second Zoom meeting with the same seven water utilities in September 2020.

A MANAGEABLE CRISIS

Overall, Covid-19 has not caused a crisis for water utilities in Finland, although their experience is varied. One indication of this was how the pandemic has affected customer relations and communication, with most respondents experiencing some disruptions but nothing they could not manage (see Table 26.1).

Most water utilities switched their customer service to operate online and via telephone so that their offices were not open to the public. Tampere Water, for example, announced that: “Our customer service is closed for the time being. We serve by e-mail and telephone as well as through the online service. Via online service you can check information about your own connection, water use and invoicing in real time.” All personnel that could do so started to work from their homes. In some cities, plumbers worked in designated pairs, avoiding contact with others: “Plumbers leave for destinations directly from their homes. All contact with customers and co-workers is avoided and minimized. No urgent work will be post-

poned to the future." Coffee rooms and break rooms were closed, or only a few people were allowed to enter at the same time. Water utility managers' aims were to make sure that staff members would not be exposed to the virus (and potentially end up in quarantine) and to guarantee that water services would always remain running.

Table 26.1
How Covid-19 has affected customer relations and communications (number of water utilities who mentioned each action)

Customer service office closed (6) or limited (1). Visits to water utility offices forbidden. Services available on the Internet or by phone.
Information and instructions available through webpage and other media (10)
Non-urgent tasks postponed. No visiting customers unless in an emergency (8)
More online services (5)
All meetings rescheduled or organized using Microsoft Teams or Skype (2)
Water museum events cancelled (1)
Distance working whenever possible (1)
Only one worker per vehicle (1)

Source: Webropol survey conducted by the authors

Although Finnish water utilities have contingency plans for different situations and emergencies, there were no direct plans on how to deal with a pandemic such as this. As one respondent noted, "the instruction from higher up to follow the emergency instructions was frustrating because waterworks did not have instructions for such an emergency. So, we used common sense and applied general guidelines when deciding what to do."

Water utilities also worked together to exchange information after the crisis started. There was dialogue between neighbouring urban water utilities and especially between those that already had cooperation mechanisms in place. One water utility told us that they immediately agreed that if any of neighbouring utilities were in trouble they would lend staff for essential tasks. The leader of a small wastewater treatment plant told us that they had considered bringing in extra staff from outside, but this was not necessary in

the end because staff remained healthy.

Nationwide, the Finnish Water Utilities Association (FIWA) played a significant role as a data collector and mediator between different water utilities. An online seminar they organized featured 220 water utilities sharing experiences. Also, a weekly online meeting organized by FIWA brought together authorities and water utilities. Around Tampere, for example, environmental and healthcare authorities convened water utilities in the Pirkanmaa region. There was a lot of unofficial discussion between different actors. In addition to FIWA, two other actors played an important role as sources of information on Covid-19: the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) and the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (FIOH). Finnish water utilities were also interested in experiences on a European scale, although no information was available in our interviews about this cooperation (on this point of pan-European cooperation, see the chapter on Aqua Publica Europea in this volume).

As water utilities in Finland are owned by municipalities (mainly limited corporations or business enterprises), cities cooperated closely at the beginning of the crisis, and the exchange of information between the water utility and the city was effective. In one case, we heard that a water utility reacted to the virus faster than the city and shut down its customer services while the city was still considering its actions.

One of Tampere Water's decisions was to stop visits to their offices. Some of their staff started working from home. Nevertheless, water quality remained the top priority at all times, and wastewater was monitored in the wastewater treatment plant (with no traces of Covid-19, although in Helsinki, there were traces of the virus found in wastewaters from the Viikinmäki wastewater treatment plant). Tampere Water increased communication on their website. They cooperated with the authorities on data collection and closed their customer service point. The utility also prioritized and increased communications directed at staff members.

CONCLUSION

Finland cancelled its state of emergency on June 15, 2020. By June 25, the number of Covid-19 fatalities in the country was 327, with deaths per million people at 59. Finland started to remove restrictions, and the city of Tampere also began to open up some services (e.g. public swimming pools and playgrounds). However, Tampere Water has approached its return to normal activities slowly. Water utilities have said that they will maintain precautions until at least the end of 2020. It seems that most office staff are still working remotely. Only a small number of workers have indicated that they want to return to the office. Some water utilities have considered enabling more telework in the future, when the crisis is over.

Nevertheless, one water utility told us that in June and July, it seemed that the staff had already forgotten precautions because there were almost no infections outside metropolitan areas of Finland. This was addressed and discipline was restored to re-establish precautionary measures. Again, precautions had to be strictly followed.

Covid-19 did not cause a crisis for water utilities in Finland. Having a municipally owned water utility has proved to be the right historical choice, since it enables seamless cooperation with the other municipal organizations to this day. The water utilities we interviewed actively exchange experiences with other water utilities and are ready to assist other water utilities during potential emergencies.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper is based on research done by the CADWES research team in the Faculty of Built Environment at Tampere University, Finland. We thank the VEPATUKI research cluster for their support. We would also like to thank the representatives from the following wa-

ter operators/associations who provided additional information for this study via personal communication:

- Huittisten Puhdistamo Oy
- Hämeenlinnan Seudun Vesi Oy
- Kurikan Vesihuolto Oy
- Kymen Vesi Oy
- Finnish Water Utilities Association (FIWA)
- Riihimäen Vesi
- Tampereen Vesi - Tampere Water
- Ylöjärven Vesi Oy
- Äänekosken Energia