

Kent County Council

Water Supply Short Focused Inquiry (SFI) Report



May 2026

1. Introduction and Scope

1.1. Introduction

- 1.1.1 A significant water supply incident affected the South East Water infrastructure in Tunbridge Wells and surrounding areas in late November and December 2025. The incident involved water quality concerns, resulting in a loss of supply for some customers and the issuing of a Boil Water Notice once supply was partially restored. The incident had a wide impact on local services and communities, with issues continuing as water quality restrictions and recovery measures were put in place.
- 1.1.2 Following this incident, County Council, at its [meeting on 18 December 2025](#), called for Scrutiny Committee to establish a Short Focused Inquiry (SFI) following a major water supply failure in Tunbridge Wells and surrounding areas. Scrutiny Committee subsequently agreed to establish the SFI on [22 January 2026](#).
- 1.1.3 Further water supply disruptions occurred in January 2026, affecting South East Water and Southern Water infrastructure. These disruptions extended over approximately two weeks and involved a broader geographical area than the December incident, affecting multiple districts across the county. The water supply failures placed pressure on existing operational, service continuity and coordination arrangements across a broad range of sectors, including education, adult social care, businesses, agriculture and rural communities. It was agreed at the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 22 January that these disruptions would also be included in the Inquiry.
- 1.1.4 The aim of the Inquiry was to consider a range of evidence from different sectors and organisations to examine the handling and impacts of the water supply failures that occurred and to develop recommendations to Kent County Council's Executive to ultimately improve emergency resilience should similar incidents occur in the future. The recommendations include actions within Kent County Council's control, alongside recommendations that the Executive may wish to pursue with external organisations.
- 1.1.5 The SFI undertook a series of informal evidence gathering sessions during March and April 2026, to consider the impacts of the incidents, the effectiveness of response arrangements, and the wider system implications arising from the disruptions. It assessed the adequacy of water companies' preparedness and operational response and identified areas that could strengthen local and regional resilience, customer protection, and accountability.
- 1.1.6 The Inquiry Group would like to record its thanks to everyone involved in the evidence gathering for their time and commitment in contributing to this Inquiry.

1.2. Inquiry Membership

1.2.1. The membership of the inquiry consisted of the following KCC Members:

Mr John Moreland (Liberal Democrat Group) - Chairman
Mr Wayne Chapman (Reform UK Group)
Mr Spencer Dixon (Reform UK Group)
Ms Sarah Emberson (Reform UK Group)
Mr Jamie Henderson (Reform UK Group)
Mr Stuart Jeffery / Mr Stuart Heaver (Green Group)
Mr Thomas Mallon (Reform UK Group)
Mr Mark Mulvihill (Reform UK Group)
Ms Claudine Russell (Conservative Group)
Mr Geoff Samme (Liberal Democrat Group)
Mr Paul Thomas (Restore Britain Group)

1.2.2 Mr Heaver replaced Mr Jeffery as the Green Group Member towards the end of the Inquiry.

1.2.3 The membership of the Inquiry included Deputy Cabinet Members, this was considered appropriate given that its primary focus was on how Kent County Council and partner agencies responded to the water incidents. During the course of the Inquiry, Mr Henderson was appointed Cabinet Member for Environment, Coastal Regeneration and Public Health. Following his appointment, he did not attend any further evidence-gathering sessions and made no contribution to the final report.

1.3. Scope

1.3.1. The scope of the inquiry was:

1. To review the lessons arising from previous water outages in Kent (2022 - 2025), and whether these have been adopted by the water industry.
2. To make recommendations on how KCC can support the water industry in Kent to improve their resilience planning and incident response processes, in the event of similar incidents in the future. This will consider KCC's role as a statutory consultee on planning applications and include the effect planning and housing growth has on water infrastructure.
3. To identify measures to improve resilience in the water supply infrastructure within Kent, and how the water industry can embed this learning.
4. Review communication channels between water companies and KCC Members.
5. To identify improvements to water infrastructure / processes relating to KCC services such as schools and care homes.
6. Provision for farms / livestock and the equity between urban and rural communities.

2. Background and Context

2.1. Definitions

- 2.1.1. **Category 1 Responding Agency** - An organisation defined under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 as having primary responsibility for emergency preparedness and response, and subject to the full range of civil protection duties under the Act. Kent County Council (KCC) is a Category 1 responder, alongside police, fire, and NHS bodies.
- 2.1.2. **Category 2 Responding Agency** - An organisation defined under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 as a *co-operating responder* that supports emergency preparedness and response but does not lead it. Category 2 responders are required to co-operate with Category 1 responders, share information, and assist with planning where their services are affected. Water companies are Category 2 responders.
- 2.1.3. **Local Resilience Forum (LRF)** - a multi-agency partnership, established under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, that brings together organisations and responsibilities for emergency preparedness, response, and recovery within a defined geographic area (linked to police force areas) in England and Wales.
- 2.1.4. **Kent and Medway Resilience Forum (KMRF)** - The LRF for Kent and Medway through which Category 1 and 2 responders coordinate emergency planning, response, and recovery across Kent and Medway.
- 2.1.5. **KMRF Water Supply Disruption Plan** - sets out the multi-agency response for Kent which is designed to enable responding agencies to support people and communities during periods of water supply disruption.
- 2.1.6. **Resilience & Emergency Planning Service** - KCC service responsible for ensuring the Council effectively prepares & plans for, responds to, and recovers from incidents (including water outages) affecting Kent and the Council. It does so by working with colleagues across the Council, and with partner agencies in the KMRF.
- 2.1.7. **Strategic Coordinating Group (SCG) - Gold Command** - A senior, strategic multi-agency command group convened during serious or widespread incidents.
- 2.1.8. **Tactical Coordinating Group (TCG) - Silver Command** - A tactical level multi-agency group responsible for implementing SCG strategy and coordinating operational responses on the ground. The TCG reports to the SCG.
- 2.1.9. **Vulnerable People & Communities Cell (VPCC)** - A command cell established to identify, support, and safeguard vulnerable residents during incidents. The VPCC reports to the TCG.

- 2.1.10. **Media and Communications Cell** - A dedicated multi-agency coordination group responsible for public messaging, media handling, and internal communications during an incident. The cell reports to the SCG and members attend TCG.
- 2.1.11. **Duty Emergency Planning Officer (DEPO)** - The on-call KCC officer who acts at the point of contact for alerting KCC to an incident. The DEPO is responsible for activating KCC resources, alerting local authorities and the voluntary sector, and representing KCC in at initial Tactical Coordination Group meetings.
- 2.1.12. **Extraordinary Cross Directorate Resilience Forum (Ex-CDRF)** - An internal KCC coordination forum convened during incidents to ensure an effective KCC response, cross directorate awareness, decision-making, and resource allocation.
- 2.1.13. **Priority Services Register (PSR)** - The Priority Services Register (PSR) is a free UK wide service which provides extra advice and support, including when there's an interruption to electricity, gas or water supplies. It helps utility companies to look after customers who have extra communication, access or safety needs for everyday and during supply disruptions.
- 2.1.14. **Ofwat** - Independent economic regulator for the water and wastewater industry in England and Wales, responsible for protecting customers by overseeing prices, performance, investment and long-term resilience of water companies.
- 2.1.15. **Drinking Water Inspectorate (DWI)** - Government body responsible for regulating and ensuring the quality and safety of public drinking water in England and Wales, by independently monitoring water companies' compliance with drinking water standards and taking enforcement action where necessary.

2.2 Water Services in Kent

- 2.2.1 Water services in Kent, and across England, are delivered through a nationally regulated system of geographically appointed monopoly providers, in which clean drinking water and wastewater services are often provided by separate companies which are statutorily appointed water or sewerage undertakers under the Water Industry Act 1991. All water companies are regulated by Ofwat, which oversees pricing, investment, service standards and long-term resilience to ensure consistency, affordability and the protection of customers and the environment nationwide.
- 2.2.2 The principal provider of clean drinking water across most of Kent is South East Water. The company supplies water to a range of urban and rural areas,

including Maidstone, Canterbury, Ashford, Sevenoaks, Tunbridge Wells, Dover, Folkestone and the Medway towns. In addition to South East Water, a limited number of properties in Kent are served by other water supply companies due to historic infrastructure arrangements and geographic boundary locations including Affinity Water (south east Kent), SES Water (small area of west Kent including Edenbridge), and Thames Water (small area of north west Kent). Responsibility for wastewater collection and sewerage infrastructure across almost the entirety of Kent lies with Southern Water, but who also provide drinking water to residents.

2.3 Overview of Incidents in November / December 2025 and January 2026

- 2.3.1 On Saturday 29 November 2025, a significant outage occurred at South East Water's Pembury Water Treatment Works due to a failure in the water-treatment process that was eventually traced to a problem with a batch of coagulant chemicals, resulting in a complete shutdown of the Pembury Water Treatment Works and the loss of water supply across the Tunbridge Wells area. At the outset, South East Water anticipated that the issue would be resolved the same day. However, as the outage continued into a second day, its scale and duration prompted the establishment of a multi-agency Tactical Coordinating Group (TCG) to manage the developing situation and coordinate partner agency activity in response to the ongoing loss of supply.
- 2.3.2 Approximately 25,000 properties were affected by the outage. These included a wide range of critical infrastructure and community facilities, such as the local hospital, care homes, GP surgeries, dental practices, schools and early years settings, alongside businesses and residential properties. The breadth and nature of those impacted highlighted the potential risks to public health, vulnerable individuals and essential services, reinforcing the need for a coordinated multi-agency response.
- 2.3.3 By the morning of 2 December, around 10,000 properties had been restored to supply and South East Water had set out plans to resupply the remaining affected areas. However, during the TCG meeting held that day, South East Water reported a further issue at the Pembury Treatment Works which necessitated the shutdown of output once again. In light of this escalation and the continued uncertainty around restoration timescales, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and Kent County Council jointly took the decision to declare a Major Incident.
- 2.3.4 A number of Kent County Council services were directly involved in the response, including Resilience and Emergency Planning, Public Health, Highways, Health and Safety, Infrastructure, and Marketing & Resident Experience.
- 2.3.5 Following the declaration, formal strategic and tactical coordination arrangements were implemented, with both Councils sharing responsibility for

chairing the Strategic and Tactical Coordinating Group meetings. In addition, two specialist cells were established and chaired by Kent County Council: a Media and Communications Cell to manage public information and messaging, and a Vulnerable People and Communities Cell to identify and support those most at risk as a result of the outage.

- 2.3.6 On 3 December, South East Water was able to begin resupplying the network, although this was accompanied by the issue of a Boil Water Notice. While running water was restored, the notice meant that continued coordination by Kent and Medway Resilience Forum partners remained essential. This included ensuring residents, businesses and critical infrastructure had access to bottled and tankered water; delivering clear and consistent public health messaging; managing and mitigating impacts on schools, care homes and medical facilities; and providing support to affected businesses.
- 2.3.7 Another incident occurred in January 2026 involving more widespread water supply disruptions. The most significant disruption occurred from around 10 January, when a combination of severe winter weather, freezing temperatures and power outages led to burst water mains, reduced treatment capacity and rapidly declining storage levels. This was exacerbated by the halting of bulk water transfers from the Southern Water network to South East Water due to infrastructure issues. As a result, water pressure fell significantly, leaving thousands of properties without supply or experiencing intermittent service across large parts of Kent, including Tunbridge Wells, Maidstone, Canterbury and Swale.
- 2.3.8 The Kent and Medway Resilience Forum collectively declared a Major Incident on 12 January 2026. This enabled enhanced emergency coordination to protect vulnerable residents and support critical infrastructure, including hospitals and care settings. Numerous schools across Kent were forced to close due to a lack of running water, and some healthcare providers cancelled appointments or moved to virtual delivery. Bottled water stations were established at multiple locations and tanker vehicles were deployed to maintain supplies to priority sites and support recovery of the network. Despite partial restoration, some areas continued to experience low pressure or repeated outages for more than a week.
- 2.3.9 These incidents attracted significant public, political and regulatory scrutiny. Ofwat and the Drinking Water Inspectorate initiated investigations into South East Water's operational resilience, incident management and customer support arrangements, with widespread calls for greater accountability and increased investment in infrastructure.

3. Evidence Gathering

3.1.1 The Inquiry undertook an intensive evidence gathering programme spanning five weeks, involving informal briefing sessions with a range of KCC Officers, key stakeholders and interested parties. The Inquiry also reviewed written information provided by external organisations and responses to a Parish Council questionnaire.

3.1.2 The Inquiry had access to background documents including:

- Notice of Ofwat's proposal to issue an enforcement order and impose a penalty on South East Water Limited
- KMRF - Water Supply Disruption Plan
- Emergency Planning for Schools in Kent 2026-2028
- KMRF Multi Agency Debrief Report – West Kent Water Disruption February 2025

3.2 Informal Briefing Sessions

Schools – Wednesday 18 March 2026

Led by KCC Officers in Education and Infrastructure

3.2.1 Schools reported a range of challenges arising from recent water supply disruptions, affecting their ability to operate safely and consistently. These included issues with the clarity and timeliness of information provided, uncertainty over the duration and extent of outages, and difficulties in planning mitigations such as the provision of bottled or tankered water. Concerns were also raised about inconsistent guidance and practices across schools, which caused confusion for parents and pupils, particularly where boil water notices were in place.

3.2.2 In addition, challenges were identified in relation to differences in site infrastructure, with some schools lacking on-site storage or contingency options, limiting their ability to remain open. The impact on vulnerable pupils, including those attending special schools, was highlighted as a key consideration, alongside the need for clearer communication, better preparedness and improved coordination to support decision-making during future incidents.

Adult Social Care – Tuesday 24 March 2026

Led by KCC Officers in Adult Social Care

3.2.3 Discussion centred on the limitations of the Priority Services Register (PSR), with significant gaps identified between registered data and actual vulnerability, requiring Adult Social Care, the NHS and voluntary groups to identify and support individuals during incidents. Members raised concerns about the accuracy, format and timeliness of data provided by water

companies, including delayed updates and overoptimistic restoration estimates, which hindered effective contingency planning. Challenges around bottled and grey water provision were also discussed, particularly the suitability of packaging, delivery failures, safeguarding risks and insufficient volumes for care settings.

- 3.2.4 The briefing further emphasised the need for stronger multi-agency coordination, earlier engagement with local voluntary organisations, and clearer best- and worst-case planning, all of which informed recommendations on data sharing, partnership working and engagement with water companies.

Resilience and Emergency Planning – Thursday 26 March

Led by KCC Officers in Infrastructure and Emergency Planning

- 3.2.5 The briefing drew attention to a series of interrelated failures in alerting, coordination and operational capacity that had a direct bearing on the Inquiry's recommendations. In a number of instances, notifications from water companies did not reach key responders, meaning the Council was required to step in and alert other responding agencies. Members noted that information shared during incidents was frequently delayed, inconsistent, or provided in formats that were difficult to use, slowing decision-making and the identification of vulnerable residents.
- 3.2.6 Issues with alternative water provision were explored in detail, including poorly sited bottled water stations, limited accessibility in rural areas, and the absence of a robust distribution model. Further concerns were raised about public communications that were overly optimistic and not aligned with operational reality, as well as the limited capacity of some partner organisations to sustain prolonged emergency responses. Ongoing infrastructure vulnerabilities and the reliance on inter-company bulk water transfers were also highlighted.
- 3.2.7 Together, these issues informed recommendations aimed at strengthening water company obligations, improving realistic scenario planning and communications, enhancing preparedness across partners, and ensuring sufficient capacity for large-scale, prolonged incidents.

Businesses and Farming – Monday 30 March 2026

Led by KCC Officers in Economy and attended by the National Farmers Union

- 3.2.8 Businesses and farming representatives outlined a range of challenges including poor and inconsistent communication from the water company, uncertainty over the duration and scope of outages, and limited business-specific guidance, particularly in relation to boil water notices and the safe operation of commercial equipment. Hospitality, retail and other water-dependent sectors were especially affected, with pre-Christmas timing exacerbating financial losses and disruption to trade.
- 3.2.9 In addition, challenges were highlighted around the suitability of mitigation measures, with bottled water provision insufficient for commercial and

agricultural needs, particularly in rural areas. The farming sector raised concerns regarding animal welfare, high daily water demand, and the lack of clarity around priority access for livestock businesses. Broader issues were also identified around fragmented communication channels for non-household customers, and the need for improved preparedness and long-term resilience planning, including clearer protocols, better data, and greater support for infrastructure solutions to reduce the impact of future incidents.

Flood / Water Management and Local Plans – Wednesday 1 April 2026
Led by KCC Officers in Strategic Planning and Water Management

- 3.2.10 The Inquiry received background information on how water supply, water efficiency and flood management is currently addressed through local plans, and the limited role of Kent County Council in influencing, rather than determining, planning policy. Concerns were raised about the lack of alignment between spatial planning and water resource management, including the fact that water companies are not statutory consultees and are not required to provide supply capacity assessments for major developments.
- 3.2.11 Members highlighted the resulting inconsistency across districts, the absence of mandatory consideration of water availability at application stage, and the limitations of planning tools. The proposed Strategic Development Strategy was identified as a potential opportunity to better align growth with infrastructure capacity, alongside the need for stronger national policy and statutory requirements to ensure future development is supported by sustainable and resilient water supply.

Parish and Town Councils – Wednesday 8 April 2026
Attended by representatives from interested Parish Councils

- 3.2.12 Parish and Town Council representatives reported widespread impacts from water supply failures, particularly in rural areas, including prolonged outages, low pressure and unsafe water requiring boil notices. Communication from water companies and local authorities was consistently described as poor or absent, with councils often relying on informal networks, social media and local knowledge to keep residents informed. Parish Councils outlined stepping in on a voluntary basis to support residents, including purchasing and distributing bottled water, coordinating welfare checks and setting up local distribution points, frequently without timely information or clear escalation routes.
- 3.2.13 Key issues raised included poor access to bottled water stations, lack of support for vulnerable residents and livestock owners, and inconsistent application of priority registers. Parish council representatives called for clearer and earlier communication, direct engagement with local councils, improved coordination between agencies, better use of local venues and volunteers, and stronger forward planning to improve the resilience and reliability of the water network and emergency response arrangements.

Public Health and Marketing and Resident Experience (MRX) – Friday 10 April

Led by KCC Officers in Public Health and MRX

- 3.2.14 Public Health and MRX highlighted serious weaknesses in the handling of recent water supply outages, particularly around protection of vulnerable residents and the quality of information provided. While Public Health intervention was triggered appropriately, concerns were raised about poor water company preparedness, unreliable data, limited engagement in multi-agency response structures and weaknesses in the Priority Services Register.
- 3.2.15 MRX reported significant communication failures, including reluctance to operate in emergency mode and inconsistent public messaging, leading to confusion and frustration. Recommendations focused on improved data sharing, clearer and consistent communications, stronger water company engagement during incidents, better identification of vulnerable residents, and more robust multi-agency planning to reduce reliance on reactive responses.

Community and Action Groups – Monday 13 April 2026

Attended by Dry Wells Action Group and Staplehurst Emergency Help Team

- 3.2.16 Community and action groups described repeated and prolonged water outages with significant impacts on residents, businesses and rural communities, and a strong sense that lessons were not being effectively learned. Local groups played a critical role during outages, establishing water distribution points, carrying out welfare checks and supporting areas well beyond their own communities, often filling gaps caused by delays or failures in official provision.
- 3.2.17 Members highlighted poor communication from the water company, including over-optimistic restoration times, conflicting information and a lack of clarity around bottled water use, which made planning and volunteer coordination difficult. Communities called for clear, pre-agreed emergency plans that activate immediately, fixed and accessible water distribution sites identified in advance, better use of local knowledge, and structured engagement with community groups, while stressing that voluntary support should complement, not replace, water company responsibilities.

Water Companies – Wednesday 15 April 2026

Attended by representatives from South East Water and Affinity Water

- 3.2.18 The water companies outlined the causes of the November / December 2025 and January 2026 incidents, the notification processes followed, and their internal incident management arrangements. It was acknowledged that prolonged incidents placed pressure on staffing and that informal engagement during the January outage contributed to uncertainty about when formal multi-agency arrangements were activated. Members raised concerns about the consistency and timeliness of information provided to partners, the

accuracy of restoration forecasts, and the impact this had on emergency planning and communication with residents.

3.2.19 Members also questioned how effectively vulnerable residents were identified and supported, the operation of Priority Services Registers, and how quickly urgent issues on the ground could be escalated and resolved. Concerns were raised about advance planning and communication for bottled water distribution sites, engagement with parish councils and community groups, and reliance on Local Resilience Forum structures to coordinate responses. Water companies described planned improvements, including dedicated senior incident rotas, clearer scenario planning, enhanced engagement with local partners, and further review of emergency response procedures. Further written information was subsequently provided following the briefing and this is outlined below at 3.3.11.

3.3 Written Information

3.3.1 The Inquiry also received additional written information from the following representatives:

[Head of Kent Resilience Team/Chair of the KMRF Lessons Identified and Lessons Learned Group](#)

3.3.2 There have been two formal KMRF debriefs relating to water disruption. Whilst the KMRF can share lessons and request feedback it cannot compel water companies to attend debriefs or act on recommendations. Although the Civil Contingencies Act requires water undertakers, as Category 2 responders, to cooperate and share information, there are no enforcement powers available to the KMRF.

3.3.3 Lessons from the [February 2025 debrief](#) following disruption in Tonbridge and surrounding areas focused primarily on improving planning and engagement. These included reviewing and updating the KMRF Water Disruption Plan, particularly around activation triggers and water distribution arrangements, and encouraging greater attendance by water company representatives at multi-agency planning meetings. Whilst the Water Disruption Plan was updated and consulted on, the November / December 2025 and January 2026 incidents showed that ongoing issues remain.

3.3.4 The debrief held in February 2026, following the Tunbridge Wells incidents in December 2025 and January 2026, identified further challenges. These included the need for water suppliers to provide more complete and realistic information at the outset of incidents, particularly around best- and worst-case durations, as outages have frequently exceeded even the stated worst-case scenarios. Additional lessons related to the identification and management of alternative water distribution sites, improving flexibility for rural communities, and building on positive practice in supplying water directly to vulnerable residents. The statement also notes learning from community-led responses

where residents organised their own water distribution when formal support was delayed.

- 3.3.5 Lessons from the February 2026 debrief have yet to be formally risk-assessed and circulated. Both South East Water and Southern Water attended the debriefs and contributed positively, but the extent to which lessons have been fully embedded is not yet clear. A task-and-finish group meeting scheduled in May 2026 will bring water providers together to review collective learning from recent incidents and update the KMRF Water Disruption Plan. Until this work is completed and the revised plan is tested, it remains difficult to assess the level of sustained engagement and learning by water companies.

Swale Borough Council

- 3.3.6 The incident caused significant disruption and uncertainty for residents, businesses, and council partners in Swale due to inconsistent and delayed information from the water company. Initially, it was unclear whether Swale was affected at all, making it difficult for the Council to offer reassurance or practical advice. Residents experienced outages that were often only confirmed retrospectively, while limited and ineffective public communications heightened community frustration and anxiety. Vulnerable residents, including those on the Priority Services Register, received bottled water deliveries without clear explanations, raising concerns about coordination and awareness of available support. As a result, council officers and partners were frequently forced into a reactive response rather than being able to plan proactively.
- 3.3.7 The incident also highlighted clear differences between rural and urban areas in terms of impact and response. Rural communities were harder to identify and support quickly due to the lack of early, accurate postcode-level data, whereas urban areas were generally prioritised in communications and initial response efforts. Swale was sometimes overlooked in favour of neighbouring boroughs considered more severely affected. Confusion was further compounded by the absence of clear mapping of pumping stations, reservoirs, and supply areas, particularly where rural communities were served by infrastructure located outside their administrative boundaries.

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

- 3.3.8 Tunbridge Wells Borough Council reported that older and vulnerable residents, including those on the Priority Services Register, were particularly affected. While bottled water deliveries were made, delays, missed deliveries and practical accessibility issues reduced their effectiveness, and limited walk-up distribution sites disadvantaged residents without access to a car.
- 3.3.9 The disruption had serious consequences for public services, businesses and the local economy. Several schools were forced to close due to the lack of water for hygiene and sanitation, with confusion over postcode coverage leading to precautionary closures at a critical time in the academic year.

Health and care facilities were prioritised but still faced operational risks, including delayed provision of alternative water supplies to care homes, dentists and a dialysis centre, requiring additional multi-agency intervention. Local businesses, particularly small and independent traders concentrated in the town centre, were significantly impacted. Many were without water for around six days and without potable water for approximately two weeks, with hospitality venues required to close entirely. Indicative evidence suggests borough-wide economic losses in the low tens of millions of pounds, with compensation widely regarded as inadequate relative to losses incurred.

3.3.10 The incident also placed sustained pressure on council resources over an extended period. Council officers supported strategic and tactical coordination arrangements, managed environmental health issues, operated a bottled water station, provided public toilet facilities, supported schools and care settings, and delivered extensive public communications. Significant senior officer time and unplanned costs were incurred across council services and partner organisations. Although the incident was predominantly urban in nature, the density of the population, concentration of businesses and traffic congestion amplified impacts across Royal Tunbridge Wells.

South East Water – Response provided on 20 April 2026

3.3.11 Following the Informal Briefing Session on Wednesday 15 April, South East Water provided written information in response to questions asked by the Inquiry. In this it outlined its approach to incident management and communications during the recent outages, noting that regular updates were issued to MPs and councillors throughout the incident. An independent incident review has since identified opportunities to improve communications during future events. The company acknowledged that there were isolated issues relating to doorstep water deliveries, confirming that appropriate action was taken where processes were not followed. While contractual arrangements require third-party delivery partners to receive site-specific and operational briefings, South East Water confirmed that these partners are not currently trained in recognising vulnerability or medical needs. The company also confirmed awareness of voluntary sector support through Local Resilience Forum (LRF) arrangements, with voluntary organisations providing assistance during the incidents.

3.3.12 In response to concerns about resilience and emergency response capacity, South East Water stated that it operates a fully staffed 24/7 incident management rota, field response teams and a continuously monitored central control room. The company recognised the need for stronger external engagement and is developing a new role within its incident management structure to improve liaison with LRF partners. Issues with communication affecting non-household customers supplied via Castle Water were attributed to an internal communication breakdown, despite existing processes and dedicated support channels. South East Water confirmed that it does not currently undertake full condition assessments of all treatment works but instead relies on performance and failure monitoring, with Hazard Reviews now being introduced across all sites under a Drinking Water Inspectorate

legal requirement. Seven treatment works in Kent, including Pembury, are subject to regulatory legal instruments.

3.3.13 South East Water set out its current emergency water provision arrangements for a range of sectors, prioritising hospitals, care homes, schools and prisons through tankering and bottled water, in line with regional guidance. Some sectors, such as GP practices, dentists and food processing facilities, are not currently classified as vulnerable sites, although contingency arrangements are under review. The company confirmed that there is no mandated minimum treated-water storage resilience standard, something it has raised with regulators. On longer-term resilience, South East Water confirmed that the Broad Oak Reservoir is fully funded, currently in the design phase, and expected to be operational by 2035. Interim measures include significant investment between 2025 and 2030, upgrades at key Kent treatment works, increased alternative water capability, expanded staffing and the creation of a dedicated maintenance team.

3.3.14 Regarding the specific failure at Pembury Treatment Works, South East Water confirmed that a full review is underway at all sites using coagulant chemicals, with completion due by mid-May 2026. Any issues identified will be progressed through its Incident Recovery Action Plan, with funding requests raised where necessary. Additional online monitoring for coagulant control has already been installed at Pembury as part of measures intended to prevent a recurrence of the incident.

3.4 Parish Council Questionnaire

3.4.1 During the course of the Inquiry a questionnaire was sent to Parish and Town Councils in Kent asking for their views in relation to their experiences during the failures. **A summary of responses received is set out in Appendix 1.** 53 Parish and Town Councils completed the questionnaire, of which 29 confirmed they were affected by a water supply failure in December 2025 and January 2026. Following this and as referred to above, interested Parish Councils were invited to meet with the Inquiry to discuss the issues further on 8 April.

3.4.2 Responses demonstrated that water supply failures were recurrent and, in some cases, prolonged, with significant impacts on residents, local services and businesses. Many communities experienced complete loss of supply, intermittent pressure, boil water notices and poor-quality water, often over several days and with some areas experiencing issues regularly during 2025. These incidents affected essential local facilities, including schools, GP surgeries and businesses, and were seen by respondents as symptomatic of limited infrastructure resilience rather than isolated events.

3.4.3 Communication failures were identified as the most significant concern. The majority of Parish and Town Councils reported poor or non-existent communication from South East Water and minimal contact from Kent County Council, often learning of outages through residents, councillors or social media. As a result, parish councils frequently became the primary source of

information for their communities, creating challenges for elderly, vulnerable and digitally excluded residents.

- 3.4.4 In the absence of effective coordination and support, Parish and Town Councils and volunteers stepped in to provide local assistance, including distributing bottled water, establishing ad hoc water stations and supporting vulnerable residents. Significant difficulties were reported with access to official water distribution points, particularly in rural areas. Overall, respondents expressed low confidence that lessons have been learned and emphasised the need for earlier notification, clearer roles, better coordination and sustained investment to improve resilience and prevent recurrence.

4. Key Issues and Recommendations

- 4.1.1 Evidence gathered throughout the Inquiry demonstrated that the water supply failures experienced across Kent during winter 2025 / 26 were not isolated operational incidents. Systemic issues were identified across communication, vulnerability identification, emergency logistics, rural and agricultural provision, leadership arrangements, community engagement, sector specific resilience, spatial planning alignment and accountability. Communication failures delayed escalation decisions, increasing pressure on vulnerable residents, schools and rural communities, while data gaps resulted in greater reliance on voluntary action, raising concerns around equity and consistency. Long standing infrastructure constraints further increased the likelihood that localised incidents escalated into multi day events. Taken together, these factors explain the scale and severity of the impacts experienced and reinforce the need for coordinated, system wide reform rather than isolated or single issue responses.
- 4.1.2 The following recommendations have been developed with due regard to the investigations being undertaken separately by the Kent and Medway Resilience Forum.

4.2 Communication, Information and Public Messaging

Communication from South East Water

- 4.2.1 Communication from South East Water was widely viewed as inadequate by stakeholders involved in the Inquiry. Concerns were raised about delays in communication, inconsistencies in messaging, and the repeated revision of information, particularly during the early stages of the outages when timely clarity was most critical.
- 4.2.2 Conflicting evidence has been provided to the Inquiry regarding whether South East Water followed the agreed communication protocols at the outset of the incidents. South East Water reported that it complied with established arrangements and engaged appropriately with the Local Resilience Forum. However, the Kent and Medway Resilience Forum reported that this did not occur. Local Authority representatives described limited engagement through expected channels and a lack of timely operational information, contributing to uncertainty about the status, scale and likely duration of the incidents.
- 4.2.3. This lack of clarity was further compounded by apparent confusion regarding communication routes. South East Water stated that it engaged with the Local Resilience Forum and that information was disseminated through this forum. In contrast, Local Authorities reported that communication was not occurring through other expected channels, significantly limiting their ability to plan and coordinate effective responses. Although South East Water engaged with the LRF and multi- agency cells, engagements with some specific cells, such as the Vulnerable Communities Cell, was limited and could have been improved.

4.2.4 South East Water acknowledged during the Inquiry that the use of over-optimistic restoration timescales contributed to additional disruption to emergency responses and a loss of public trust. While initially reluctant to commit to the routine provision of explicit best-case and worst-case forecasts, the company accepted that doing so would better support Local Authority emergency planning and agreed this was an area requiring improvement.

4.2.5 More broadly, despite South East Water's view that it communicated effectively through its established channels, all stakeholder groups represented in the Inquiry reported a lack of clear, timely and usable communication. The Inquiry therefore concluded that South East Water's communication arrangements were not as effective in practice as the company considered them to be.

Communication from Kent County Council

4.2.6 Stakeholders also reported dissatisfaction with communication from Kent County Council and partner Local Authorities. While internal communication between officers was generally described as effective, dissemination of information to external stakeholders was felt to be insufficient during the incidents. That said, existing incident response procedures allocate the responsibility for communicating with parish / town councils and local community groups to borough / district councils, with no requirement for Kent County Council to duplicate this work.

4.2.7 Concern was expressed regarding KCC assuming greater responsibility for public-facing communication in future incidents. This was attributed to reliance on information supplied by the utility company and concerns regarding potential reputational or legal risk should information later prove inaccurate, incomplete or become outdated.

4.2.8 Nevertheless, the Inquiry noted that KCC is a large organisation with established communication networks and significant convening power. While recognising the limitations faced by the Local Authority where information is controlled by a third-party utility, stakeholders nonetheless expected clearer, more visible and more consistent communication from KCC during the outages.

Information Sharing and Multi-Agency Coordination

4.2.9 Beyond organisational communication, the Inquiry identified wider weaknesses in information sharing and coordination. Information relating to affected areas, restoration timescales and operational plans was not consistently available at the pace or in formats required to support rapid and effective decision-making.

4.2.10 Variability in data quality and messaging created challenges for coordinating responses, planning mitigations and providing clear, consistent information to

residents, service users and stakeholders. This affected schools, care providers, businesses and community organisations alike.

4.2.11 The Inquiry identified a clear misalignment between the utility company's view that engagement with the Local Resilience Forum was sufficient, and the Local Authorities' experience that this did not meet their operational needs.

Recommendation 1:

KCC should:

- a) Review multi-agency provision for communicating with Parish Councils and local communities and identify where KCC can support lower tier authorities in engaging with these groups.**
- b) Ensure multi-agency communications are reflected in internal KCC crisis communications plans.**
- c) Develop clear communication channels for direct and rapid communication with KCC Members.**
- d) Recommend that water companies develop a centralised communication system for businesses and farmers.**
- e) Recommend that water companies use consistent language across their communication channels and provide best and worst-case scenarios at the outset of an incident.**
- f) Request that water companies commit to proactive and consistent engagement with local authorities during a crisis including, in particular, with any cells established by the KMRF, rather than engaging with the LRF alone.**

4.3 Identification and Support of Vulnerable Residents

4.3.1 Evidence consistently demonstrated that existing approaches to identifying vulnerability were insufficient for large-scale, prolonged outages. Reliance on self-registration through the utility companies' Priority Services Register meant that many residents known to statutory or voluntary services were not visible to water companies at critical points. Vulnerability also evolved during incidents, with residents becoming at risk over time due to declining health, exhaustion of coping mechanisms, or changing caring responsibilities.

4.3.2 The Inquiry heard that voluntary and community organisations often identified unmet need earlier than formal systems, yet intelligence sharing was ad hoc and reactive. This resulted in parallel processes, inefficiencies, and an increased risk of residents falling through gaps in provision. The evidence

supports the need for dynamic, multi-agency vulnerability frameworks rather than static registers held by individual organisations.

Recommendation 2:

KCC should:

- a) **Recommend that water companies improve Priority Services Register arrangements to enable simpler third-party referrals.**
- b) **Recommend that water companies establish reliable data-sharing mechanisms with responding agencies during incidents. This would assist with identifying developing vulnerability during an incident.**
- c) **Recommend that water companies ensure appropriate staff receive training on vulnerability, safeguarding and accessibility, and that alternative water provision is appropriate for education, care, and health settings.**

4.3 Emergency Water Distribution and Alternative Supply

4.3.1 Alternative water provision arrangements were a significant source of difficulty. Bottled water distribution models, designed primarily for short-duration domestic outages, did not scale effectively to multi-day incidents affecting whole communities, rural areas or institutional settings. Distribution points were frequently poorly located, volumes were insufficient for high-demand users, and delivery methods raised safeguarding, accessibility and dignity concerns.

4.3.2 Members also heard that there was limited clarity over escalation thresholds, including when bottled water ceased to be viable, and when tankered or alternative supply should be triggered. In practice, this led to delayed interventions and heightened risk to services already operating with limited tolerance for disruption.

Recommendation 3:

KCC should:

- a) **Recommend that water companies adopt flexible distribution models, agreed in advance with local authorities, parish councils and community groups, with clear escalation triggers and alternative water provision is tailored to domestic, institutional, commercial and agricultural needs.**
- b) **Recommend that water companies liaise with local authorities (including KCC) and Parish / Town councils to maintain an up to date, regularly reviewed list of suitable sites for alternative water**

distribution and ensure rural communities are properly mapped and considered in planning and response arrangements.

- c) Remind utility companies that alternative water deliveries to households and vulnerable residents must be made accessible where it is safe and appropriate to do so.**

4.4 Businesses, Farming and Rural Water Use

4.4.1 The farming sector was disproportionately exposed to water supply interruptions due to very high daily water requirements, animal welfare considerations and rural access constraints. Evidence demonstrated that emergency provision models were not designed for livestock or agricultural operations, and that bottled water schemes were wholly unsuitable for sustained agricultural use. Communication failures compounded these risks by limiting farmers' ability to plan mitigation or secure alternative water sources.

4.4.2 Rural geography further amplified vulnerability, with long distances to distribution points, limited tanker access and sparse infrastructure redundancy. While many farms have invested in on-site storage or water harvesting, these measures cannot substitute for coordinated, system-level planning. The Inquiry highlighted that agriculture currently sits outside many emergency water assumptions despite its importance to food supply, animal welfare and the rural economy.

Recommendation 4:

KCC should:

- a) Recommend that water companies, working with local authorities and rural stakeholders, identify high-water-use agricultural sites and businesses to prioritise during outages and plan realistic alternative supply options beyond bottled water.**
- b) Recommend that water companies improve communication channels with the customers of licensed retail water suppliers (such as Castle Water) who were left without service information or compensation clarity.**

4.5 Engagement with Communities, Parish Councils and the Voluntary Sector

4.5.1 Community groups and Parish Councils were critical to the response, particularly in rural areas, providing welfare checks, local intelligence, reassurance, and practical distribution support. However, this local knowledge was under-used despite communities often responding fastest. Engagement

was often informal and dependent on existing relationships rather than embedded within formal response plans.

4.5.2 There appeared to be a disconnect between district and borough councils and more localised authorities, such as town and parish councils, as well as the voluntary sector operating at that level. While existing multi-agency protocols set out that boroughs and districts are responsible for liaising with local communications networks, this is an area where KCC can provide support and coordination, but cannot and should not assume responsibility.

4.5.2 Where early and structured engagement occurred, outcomes were demonstrably better. Where it did not, communities reported feeling isolated and under-informed. The evidence supports formalising community engagement arrangements to ensure consistency, equity and effective use of local knowledge across the county.

Recommendation 5:

KCC should:

- a) **Encourage and support District and Borough Councils to more formally integrate parish and town councils and voluntary sector partners into incident response arrangements. This should include maintaining up-to-date contact lists, clearly defined roles, and earlier activation of these partners during incidents. KCC should also engage with wider local authorities and the Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC) to agree how best to support parish and town councils and local action groups, including the effective and safe use of local volunteers during future water outages, and to encourage the adoption of community-level incident response plans where appropriate.**
- b) **Recommend, through KMRF partners, that all Parish and Town Councils prepare and regularly review an Emergency Response Plan, using the guidance provided by KMRF - [Building Community Resilience | Kent Prepared](#)**

4.6 Impacts on Schools, Care Settings and Public Health

4.6.1 Education, care and health-critical settings experienced disproportionate disruption due to low tolerance for uncertainty and heightened safeguarding and infection control risks. In several cases, closures occurred not because of absolute loss of supply, but due to insufficient clarity on safety thresholds, duration of disruption or viable contingency options.

4.6.2 Public health evidence highlighted that inconsistent interpretation of water quality advice amplified anxiety and contributed to overly cautious operational decisions. This demonstrated the need for clearer, sector-specific guidance aligned with operational realities and infrastructure constraints.

Recommendation 6:

KCC should:

- a) Strengthen sector-specific contingency guidance, supported by accurate infrastructure data and clear decision-making thresholds, with priority given to SEND schools, care homes and health-critical services.**
- b) Update the Schools Emergency Planning Guidance with water-specific prompts to enable decision making (e.g. assessing day-start water sufficiency; contingency triggers) while avoiding rigid one-size thresholds, and request that schools include a water outage scenario in their emergency plans.**
- c) Maintain a register of each KCC maintained school's water infrastructure (tanks, capacity, access constraints, mains-only sites) to speed deployment decisions.**
- d) Agree with water companies practical contingency options for different site types (e.g. realistic volumes for toilet flushing; alternatives for mains-only secondary sites).**

4.7 Planning, Infrastructure and Long-Term Resilience

- 4.7.1 Planning, water resource management and emergency response operate within different statutory and regulatory frameworks, and the Inquiry identified the lack of alignment between these systems as a significant risk to long term resilience. There is currently no statutory requirement for water or other utility companies to be formally consulted on planned development, creating a risk that housing and commercial growth proceeds without adequate supporting infrastructure. This limits the ability of Local Authorities to ensure that development is underpinned by resilient water supply, particularly in areas experiencing sustained growth and water stress. Members identified this disconnect as a key area for continued national advocacy.
- 4.7.2 The Inquiry noted with concern that some Borough and District Councils' Local Plans were published some time ago and may not reflect the current issues with water supply infrastructure.
- 4.7.3 Recurrent outages were presented as symptoms of networks operating with limited headroom, compounded by housing growth, ageing assets, climate volatility and increased reliance on inter-company bulk water transfers.
- 4.7.4 The Inquiry consistently highlighted and noted with concern the connection between emergency response challenges and long-term infrastructure pressures linked to insufficient capital investment and asset maintenance.

Recommendation 7:

KCC should:

- a) Support the recommendations within the Cunliffe Review and Defra's 2026 White Paper, [A New Vision for Water](#), for national policy change, making water companies a statutory consultee for new development and advocates for statutory consultee reform to be implemented at pace. KCC will continue to use the Strategic Development Strategy to embed county-wide expectation on water resilience.**
- b) Recommend District and Borough Councils continue to engage with utility companies as part of the planning process for a planning development, ensuring implementation of National Planning Policy Framework reforms to strengthen engagement and cooperation.**

4.8 Accountability, Learning and Assurance

- 4.8.1 Communities and Members expressed concern that similar issues have arisen following previous incidents and that confidence in sustained improvement remains limited. While water companies acknowledged failings and outlined improvement plans, the absence of transparent, measurable tracking mechanisms restricts public and Member assurance.
- 4.8.2 KMRF multi-agency debriefs have taken place (with future debriefs planned) and have identified learning and areas for improvement. Embedding these consistently will require ongoing coordination across organisations with differing responsibilities and governance arrangements.
- 4.8.3 The Inquiry has therefore concluded that water companies must take greater responsibility for leading the management and communication of water supply disruptions. Clearer utility-led ownership is required to ensure pressures do not default to KCC and partner organisations in future incidents.

Recommendation 8:

KCC should:

- a) Monitor the delivery of agreed improvements, commitments made by water companies, and evidence of enhanced performance during future incidents, to support ongoing Member scrutiny. The KCC Resilience and Emergency Planning Service should report progress to a relevant KCC committee with provision for representatives of water companies and/or the KMRF to provide annual updates.**
- b) Request water companies familiarise themselves with KCC and KMRF emergency plans and be asked to provide briefing sessions for KMRF partners to support shared understanding of respective roles and response arrangements.**

- c) Request water companies provide their detailed Emergency Response Plan to the KMRF, providing as much detail as possible in the public domain.**

5. Conclusion and next steps

- 5.1 Following the SFI, the Inquiry has developed the above recommendations. The findings and recommendations must be considered in the context that Kent County Council was involved in the response to the water supply incidents in its role as a Category 1 responder under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. The Inquiry is clear that responsibility for the operation and maintenance of the water supply network, and for the provision of timely, accurate and operationally useful information, sits with the water companies. Where these responsibilities are not effectively discharged, pressure is displaced onto Local Authorities and partners in a way that is neither appropriate nor sustainable.
- 5.2 Despite the challenges identified, the Inquiry also noted areas of relative strength. Internal mobilisation across KCC was rapid and effective, cross-directorate working was strong, and voluntary and community sector responses provided critical support where formal systems were under strain. Response arrangements improved during repeat incidents as lessons were rapidly applied. These strengths provide a foundation on which future improvements can be built.
- 5.3 The findings and recommendations of the SFI, once noted by the Scrutiny Committee on 13 May 2026, are to be submitted to the Executive. In accordance with relevant Scrutiny regulations and the KCC Constitution the Executive must report in a reasonable timeframe to explain how it will respond to the recommendations.