

By: Linden Kemkaran, Leader

To: County Council

Date: 16 July 2026

Subject: **Water Resilience in Kent: Strengthening Preparedness, Partnership and Long-Term Planning**

Summary:

Kent has experienced a series of significant water supply disruptions which have affected residents, businesses and public services, and highlighted the need for a stronger, coordinated approach to water resilience. Although Kent County Council does not have a statutory role in water supply, it has an important leadership, convening and emergency resilience role, working with Government, regulators, water companies and local partners.

This report sets out the Council's current and planned activity, including development of a 25-year Water Resources Strategy, establishment of the Kent Water Resilience Partnership, and consideration of the Scrutiny Committee Short Focused Inquiry recommendations, to strengthen Kent's preparedness, response and long-term resilience.

Recommendations:

County Council is asked to:

- I. **NOTE** the increasing frequency and impact of water supply disruption in Kent and the significant implications for residents, businesses, public services and future growth
 - II. **ENDORSE** the Council's leadership, convening and advocacy role in working with Government, regulators, water companies, district and borough councils, businesses and community partnerships to improve water resilience.
 - III. **SUPPORT** the development of KCC's 25-year Water Resources Strategy and the integration of water resilience into planning, infrastructure, emergency response and economic development activity.
 - IV. **SUPPORT** the establishment of the Kent Water Resilience Partnership as the principal county-wide forum for identifying priorities, securing commitments and developing a shared action plan.
 - V. **NOTE** that the recommendations from the Scrutiny Committee Short Focused Inquiry will be considered through the appropriate governance route, with accepted actions incorporated into the wider resilience programme.
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1. Introduction: Water supply issues in Kent

- 1.1 Kent has experienced a number of significant water supply disruptions over the past 12–18 months, highlighting both the fragility of existing infrastructure and the increasing pressures on the county's water resources. These unacceptable disruptions affect the lives and wellbeing of the County's residents and have a devastating impact on businesses.
- 1.2 These incidents, including the major outage affecting Tunbridge Wells and surrounding areas, have underscored the need for a coordinated, system-wide response across national government, regulators, water companies and local partners. The Council's resources are being redirected from frontline service delivery to deal with the increasingly frequent interruptions to supply.
- 1.3 While Kent County Council (KCC) does not hold a statutory role in water supply, it has a critical leadership, convening and resilience function, including through its work with partners and the Kent and Medway Resilience Forum (KMRF). KCC will advocate for residents, businesses and its own services is demanding that the present unacceptable situation does not persist and that solutions are found by Government and the Utility Companies.

2. KCC's Role, Current Delivery and Preparedness

- 2.1 KCC does not have statutory responsibility for water supply, but is has an important leadership, convening, advocacy and emergency resilience role, including through its work with water companies, local partners and the Kent and Medway Resilience Forum (KMRF).
- 2.2 Considerable work is already underway across the Council to reduce demand, improve preparedness and support critical sectors, including residents, schools, community facilities, agriculture and businesses.
- 2.3 The Council has strengthened crisis communications arrangements, including clearer briefing routes to Members during incidents, and is working through the KMRF to improve partner coordination, vulnerability support, alternative water provision and response planning.
- 2.4 Existing and ongoing work includes water audits and demand reduction across the KCC estate and Kent schools, rainwater harvesting pilots, a water trading platform for farmers, and reservoir development guidance for farmers and landowners.

- 2.5 The Energy and Adaption Team has also secured £200,000 from the Pathways to Resilience programme to work with partners on a Kent-wide water resilience plan, supporting delivery of the wider Water Resources Strategy.

3. Scrutiny Committee Short Focused Inquiry

- 3.1 Kent 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.
- 3.2 Further water supply disruptions occurred in January 2026. It was agreed at the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 22 January that these disruptions would also be included in the Inquiry.
- 3.3 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 and for completeness these are included as an appendix to this report.
- 3.4 The administration welcomes the work of the Short Focused Inquiry and this paper touches on some areas of activity already in delivery. It is recognised that the substantive discussion about that report and a detailed analysis of the work already underway is planned for the Scrutiny Committee next month. The executive welcomes the opportunity to discuss that response in more detail at that meeting.

4. Long Term Strategic Approach

- 4.1 The Council is taking forward a comprehensive programme to improve water resilience across Kent given the criticality mentioned above. However, the Council also expects the Government, utilities and other agencies to play their part.
- 4.2 The programme will be aligned to national policy developments including the Government's January 2026 White Paper, *A Vision for Water*, which sets out a programme of reform following the Independent Water Commission review

and will maximise the impact of KCC involvement and ensure that progress is tracked and monitored locally.

- 4.3 Central to this work is the development of a KCC **25-year Water Resources Strategy**, which is currently underway. Timelines for this item of work have shifted slightly so that it can take account of new supply/demand modelling by Water Resources South East, expected at the end of 2026. This will provide a much-improved understanding of where the risks lie in respect of meeting future water needs in the county and ensure our Strategy is correctly focused on what is needed to tackle these challenges. Consequently, the draft Strategy will be brought through the Council's governance processes in early 2027 prior to public consultation.
- 4.4 This strategy will focus on five priority areas:
- **Integrated Water Planning** – embedding water considerations into spatial planning and infrastructure decisions
 - **Supporting the Local Economy** – ensuring resilience for key sectors including food production and business
 - **Balancing Supply and Demand** – promoting water efficiency across domestic, public, commercial and agricultural use
 - **Investment in Resilience** – supporting infrastructure, storage, recycling and innovation
 - **Environmental Protection** – safeguarding ecosystems through catchment-based and nature-based approaches

5. Establishing the Kent Water Resilience Partnership

- 5.1 A key component of the Leader's approach is the establishment of the Kent Water Resilience Partnership, bringing together leaders from across government, regulators, water companies, local authorities and key economic sectors.
- 5.2 The Partnership has been designed to reflect the complexity of the water system, with participation proposed from:
- National regulators and government
 - Water companies
 - District and borough councils, Group Leaders from KCC.
 - Developers and planners
 - Farming and business sectors
 - Environmental and community organisations

- 5.3 The aim is to move at pace from identifying the challenges through to agreeing collaborative actions, including mechanisms for investment, delivery and long-term resilience planning.
- 5.4 The inaugural meeting will take place on 8 October 2026, chaired by the Leader of the Council, and will include:
- A strategic examination session with senior leaders to identify priority challenges and system-wide barriers
 - A collaborative workshop session to develop a draft action plan for partnership delivery.
- 5.5 The Partnership will receive contributions from organisations such as:
- Water Resources South East
 - Water UK
 - Waterwise
 - Consumer Council for Water
 - Niab East Malling
 - University of Kent
 - Canterbury Christ Church University
 - University of Greenwich
- 5.6 The partnership will seek to establish a programme of regular performance reporting by Kent's water companies, providing transparent, county-wide data, progress updates and measurable outcomes against key resilience and environmental objectives. It is anticipated that reporting should include performance indicators and trend analysis relating to:
- **Water resilience**, including supply capacity, demand management and drought preparedness;
 - **Water outages**, including the frequency, duration and impact of service interruptions;
 - **Pollution incidents**, including causes, environmental impacts and remedial actions; and
 - **Sewage discharges and outfalls**, including the frequency, duration and location of storm overflows and actions being taken to reduce their occurrence.
- 5.7. This reporting should enable effective scrutiny, support public transparency, and provide assurance that water companies are delivering sustained improvements for residents, communities and the environment across Kent.

6. Key Priorities for 2026

- 6.1 The Council's approach seeks to bring together immediate improvements to resilience and emergency response, alongside a longer-term strategic

programme to ensure Kent is better prepared for future demand, climate challenges and growth pressures.

6.2 The priorities for the remainder of 2026 and beyond are to:

- Establish and mobilise the Kent Water Resilience Partnership
- Finalise the draft and publicly consult on the 25-year Water Resources Strategy
- Drive delivery of SFI recommendations within KCC's remit
- Strengthen partnership working with water companies and regulators
- Embed water resilience into planning, growth and infrastructure decisions
- Improve preparedness and responsiveness to future incidents

6.3 Progress against these six priorities, and any other further updates on water resilience action within the county, will be reported to the GET Cabinet Committee in November 2026.

7. Recommendations

7.1 County Council is asked to:

- I. **NOTE** the increasing frequency and impact of water supply disruption in Kent and the significant implications for residents, businesses, public services and future growth
- II. **ENDORSE** the Council's leadership, convening and advocacy role in working with Government, regulators, water companies, district and borough councils, businesses and community partnerships to improve water resilience.
- III. **SUPPORT** the development of KCC's 25-year Water Resources Strategy and the integration of water resilience into planning, infrastructure, emergency response and economic development activity.
- IV. **SUPPORT** the establishment of the Kent Water Resilience Partnership as the principal county-wide forum for identifying priorities, securing commitments and developing a shared action plan.
- V. **NOTE** that the recommendations from the Scrutiny Committee Short Focused Inquiry will be considered through the appropriate governance route, with accepted actions incorporated into the wider resilience programme

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Water Resilience Partnership Terms of Reference

Appendix 2 – Short Focus Inquiry Report

Report Author

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