

From: Brian Collins, Deputy Leader of the Council

Jamie Henderson, Cabinet Member for Environment, Coastal Regeneration,
and Public Health

Simon Jones, Corporate Director, Growth, Environment, and Transport

Rebecca Spore, Director of Infrastructure

To: Scrutiny Committee – 3 August 2026

Subject: Executive response to the recommendations made by the Water Supply
Short Focused Inquiry

Classification: *Unrestricted*

Summary: The Water Supply Short Focused Inquiry was established following cross-party support and reported on its findings earlier this year (May 2026). This report provides the Executive response to the recommendations made by the inquiry.

In summary, the executive fully supports the report and its findings with **all recommendations accepted**. This report sets out the detailed response to each.

Recommendation(s):

The Scrutiny Committee is asked to

1. **CONSIDER** the Executive response to the recommendations made by the Water Supply Short-Focused Inquiry; and
2. **COMMENT** on the proposed response and any further action required.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Water Supply Short Focused Inquiry was established by the Scrutiny Committee following the major water supply failures in Tunbridge Wells and surrounding areas in December 2025 and subsequent Kent-wide disruptions in January 2026. The final report was considered by the Scrutiny Committee on 13 May 2026.
- 1.2 The Inquiry concluded that the water supply incidents of winter 2025/26 exposed a range of issues relating to communication, identification of vulnerable residents, emergency water distribution, support for businesses and rural communities, community engagement, sector resilience, infrastructure planning and accountability.
- 1.3 At its meeting on 13 May 2026, the Scrutiny Committee resolved to note the Short Focused Inquiry Report into Water Supply and confirm that it

be submitted to the Leader and relevant Cabinet Members, along with a request for a formal response to the recommendations within two months.

- 1.4 The Executive welcomes the Inquiry's comprehensive review with all the recommendations accepted. The table below sets out the Executive's response to the eight recommendations.
- 1.5 It should be noted that a number of the recommendations are not within KCC control and fall to either the Kent and Medway Resilience Forum or the Water Companies, where this is the case, KCC has written to the relevant body, highlighting the recommendations of the Inquiry, with the response and action being monitored through the appropriate forum as outlined in the paper.
- 1.6 In addition, whilst the Inquiry focused predominately on specific incidents, there is a need for a strategic approach to water resilience and management of water resources across the County and a Water Resilience Partnership chaired by KCC is being established. The Terms of Reference for this group which will include a range of stakeholders was endorsed by Full Council in July, with its first meeting planned for the Autumn.

2 Recommendation 1. Communication, Information and Public Messaging

Part	Element	Response	Status	Lead
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.	Accepted	In progress	Kent & Medway Resilience Forum ¹ (KMRF)
B	Ensure multi-agency communications are reflected in internal KCC crisis communications plans.	Accepted	In progress	KCC Resilience & Emergency Planning Service KCC Communications
C	Develop clear communication channels for direct and rapid communication with KCC Members.	Accepted	Complete	KCC Resilience & Emergency Planning Service KCC Communications
D	Recommend that water companies develop a centralised communication system for businesses and farmers.	Accepted	In progress	Water companies ²
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.	Accepted	In progress	Water companies
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.	Accepted	In progress	Water companies

KCC is currently updating the KCC Crisis Communications Plan, which includes sections on multi-agency and internal comms, including processes for liaising with members during an incident.

KCC has also written to the Chair of the Kent & Medway Resilience Forum (KMRF) to request that the relevant recommendations (in this case, Rec.1A) arising from the short focused inquiry relating to multi-agency working are progressed through the appropriate KMRF working groups. KCC, through officer attendance at KMRF working groups, will monitor progress and report back to the appropriate KCC Cabinet Committee. However, KCC has no legislative powers to compel these recommendations to be actioned.

¹ The Kent & Medway Resilience Forum is a partnership of Category 1 & 2 responding agencies (including KCC) that are required by the Civil Contingencies Act (2004) to come together to plan & prepare for, respond to, and recover from incidents and emergencies affecting Kent and Medway.

² There are five water companies that provide drinking water to residents across Kent. They are South East Water, Southern Water, Affinity Water, SES Water, and Thames Water.

Separately, KCC has written to the chief executives of all five water companies that supply drinking water to residents in Kent regarding those recommendations (in this case, Recs. 1D / 1E / 1F) that are within the power of those companies to action and embed. Progress will be monitored through water company engagement with the KCC Flood Risk and Water Management Committee, although again, KCC has no legislative power to compel these recommendations to be completed. The water companies will be invited to attend the KCC Flood Risk and Water Management Committee as necessary.

3 Recommendation 2. Identification and Support of Vulnerable Residents

Part	Element	Response	Status	Lead
A	Recommend that water companies improve Priority Services Register arrangements to enable simpler third-party referrals.	Accepted	In progress	Water companies
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.	Accepted	In progress	Water companies
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.	Accepted	In progress	Water companies

As with other recommendations relevant to water companies, KCC has written to the chief executives of the five that supply drinking water to residents in Kent regarding all three parts of this recommendation. Progress will be monitored through water company engagement with the KCC Flood Risk and Water Management Committee.

4 Recommendation 3. Emergency Water Distribution and Alternative Supply

Part	Element	Response	Status	Lead
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.	Accepted	In progress	Water companies
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.	Accepted	In progress	Water companies
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.	Accepted	In progress	Water companies

As with other recommendations relevant to water companies, KCC has written to the chief executives of the five that supply drinking water to residents in Kent regarding all three parts of this recommendation. Progress will be monitored through water company engagement with the KCC Flood Risk and Water Management Committee.

5 Recommendation 4. Businesses, Farming and Rural Water Use

Part	Element	Response	Status	Lead
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.	Accepted	In progress	Water companies
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.	Accepted	In progress	Water companies

As with other recommendations relevant to water companies, KCC has written to the chief executives of the five that supply drinking water to residents in Kent regarding both parts of this recommendation. Progress will be monitored through water company engagement with the KCC Flood Risk and Water Management Committee.

6 Recommendation 5. Engagement with Communities, Parish Councils and the Voluntary Sector

Part	Element	Response	Status	Lead
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.	Accepted	In progress	KMRF
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	Accepted	In progress	KMRF

As with other multi-agency recommendations, KCC has written to the Chair of the Kent & Medway Resilience Forum to request that both parts of this recommendation are progressed through the appropriate KMRF working groups. KCC, through officer attendance at KMRF working groups, will monitor progress and report back to the appropriate KCC Cabinet Committee.

7 Recommendation 6. Impacts on Schools, Care Settings and Public Health

Part	Element	Response	Status	Lead
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.	Accepted	In progress	KCC Infrastructure KCC Education KCC Adult / Children's Social Care
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.	Accepted	In progress	KCC Education
C	Maintain a register of each KCC maintained school's water infrastructure (tanks, capacity, access constraints, mains-only sites) to speed deployment decisions.	Accepted	In progress	KCC Infrastructure KCC Education

Part	Element	Response	Status	Lead
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).	Accepted	In progress	KCC Infrastructure KCC Education

KCC Infrastructure has started engaging with South East Water to agree what water infrastructure is in place at each site and therefore what alternate water provision would be needed in the event of water supply disruption, as outlined in Parts C and D of this recommendation.

KCC Resilience & Emergency Planning Service is also liaising with KCC Education and Adults / Children's Social Care regarding sector specific guidance. KCC Education will use the Autumn Term to review and update the Emergency Planning Guidance where appropriate. They will also work with Infrastructure where there are requirements to upgrade specific school sites. In addition, since the publication of the SFI report, a series of workshops have been completed with Adult Social Care services and providers to explore the impact of water supply disruption on the diverse range of services supporting the people of Kent, raise awareness across the sector, and capture good practice examples which will be used to inform stronger sector-specific contingency guidance.

The Emergency Planning Guidance is free to any school located in Kent, so all state funded schools automatically receive a copy even if they are Academies / Free Schools.

For education and care settings, the responsibility for business continuity planning for a range of disruptive events sits with each setting / provider.

8 Recommendation 7. Planning, Infrastructure and Long-Term Resilience

Part	Element	Response	Status	Lead
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.	Accepted	In progress	Kent Water Resilience Partnership
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.	Accepted	In progress	Kent Water Resilience Partnership

Both parts of this recommendation sit comfortably within the Terms of Reference for the new Kent Water Resilience Partnership, with its focus on long-term water resilience across the county. The partnership includes borough and district councils, which gives an opportunity to progress the second part of this recommendation. The partnership also includes central government and regulators in its membership, allowing the first part to also be progressed.

9 Recommendation 8. Accountability, Learning and Assurance

Part	Element	Response	Status	Lead
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.	Accepted	In progress	KCC Flood Risk & Water Management Committee
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.	Accepted	In progress	Water companies
C	Request water companies provide their detailed Emergency Response Plan to the KMRF, providing as much detail as possible in the public domain.	Accepted	In progress	Water companies

As with other recommendations relevant to water companies, KCC has written to the chief executives of the five that supply drinking water to residents in Kent regarding parts B and C of this recommendation. Progress will be monitored through water company engagement with the KCC Flood Risk and Water Management Committee.

The Committee will lead on Part A, supported by the KCC Resilience & Emergency Planning Service and the KCC Environment division.