

By: Anna Taylor – Assistant Democratic Services Manager (Scrutiny)

To: Scrutiny Committee – 22 January 2026

Subject: Short Focused Inquiry – Failure of Water Supply in Tunbridge Wells and surrounding areas.

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary

Following the resolution of the County Council, on 18 December 2025, which called for the establishment of a Short-Focused Inquiry by the Scrutiny Committee, this report confirms the process and the next steps in relation to this request.

Introduction

1. At the County Council meeting, on 18 December 2025, the Liberal Democrat Group tabled a Motion for Time Limited Debate (MTLD) on the failure of the water supply in Tunbridge Wells and surrounding areas.
2. As the motion set out, on 29 November a major water supply failure struck Tunbridge Wells and surrounding areas. This water shutdown cut water pressure or eliminated supply entirely for up to 24,000 properties across Tunbridge Wells and the surrounding areas.
3. The disruption continued into December until, on 12 December, the boil notice was lifted following treatment adjustments and extensive testing.
4. Following cross party agreement at the County Council meeting in December Members agreed the following:

The Council calls for the establishment of a Short-Focused Inquiry (SFI) by the Scrutiny Committee. This inquiry should seek:

- a) To identify what lessons were learned but not enacted between 2022 and 2025.
- b) What can be learned from the recent water outage in Tunbridge Wells (and elsewhere in Kent within recent years), including steps required to prevent recurrence of similar incidents and measures to build greater resilience, particularly for care homes, schools and other KCC services.
- c) How KCC can best contribute to effective support and relief efforts in the event of similar incidents in the future.

5. The responsibility for the establishment of SFIs sits with the Scrutiny Committee with Membership as set out in the Proportionality report to County Council on 18 December 2025. The process in relation to the Inquiry is for a background briefing to be produced for Members by the relevant directorate. Officers from Democratic Services will scope out the issue, further to the below proposed Terms of Reference, and agree with the Chair and SFI Group the people from whom the Group should hear. A limited number of informal briefings will then be arranged for Members of the Inquiry Group. After those briefings have taken place, the Inquiry Group will informally discuss and agree a draft report featuring key findings and any recommendations it wishes to make. This report will then be submitted to the Scrutiny Committee for formal consideration. If the report and recommendations are agreed by the Scrutiny Committee, while meeting formally, the report will be submitted to the Leader and relevant Cabinet Member(s) for a response within two months. The SFI group will disband once it has formally reported to the Scrutiny Committee and future responsibility for monitoring will transfer to the Scrutiny Committee.

Proposed Terms of Reference and focus of the SFI.

6. Membership of the 11 Member SFI shall be, as agreed by County Council, Reform (6), Lib Dem (2), Conservative (1), Green (1), Independent Group (1). Membership to be confirmed following agreement by the Scrutiny Committee and the Chair to be agreed at the first meeting.
7. The MLTD to County Council on 18 December set out three key questions the SFI should answer – these form the basis of the Terms of Reference of the SFI with some additional points as set out below.
8. The purpose of the Short Focused Inquiry will be to examine the causes, handling and impacts of the December 2025 water supply failures affecting Tunbridge Wells and the surrounding areas. To assess the adequacy of South East Water's (SEW) preparedness and response and recommend actions to strengthen local and regional resilience, customer protection and accountability. The inquiry might also consider links to subsequent supply interruptions in early January 2026.
 - a. To identify what lessons were learned but not enacted between 2022 and 2025.
 - b. What can be learned from the recent water outage in Tunbridge Wells (and elsewhere in Kent within recent years), including steps required to prevent recurrence of similar incidents and measures to build greater resilience, particularly for care homes, schools and other KCC services.
 - c. How KCC can best contribute to effective support and relief efforts in the event of similar incidents in the future.
 - d. To identify what lessons were identified but not enacted between 2022 and 2025 by South East Water (SEW)

- e. Identify measures that could be taken to improve resilience in the water supply infrastructure by SEW and how SEW can embed any learning.
 - f. Identify measures to improve SEW infrastructure for KCC services both in planning and response.
9. It is proposed that evidence could be drawn from the following witnesses:
- a. KCC Leadership and Emergency Teams
 - b. Tunbridge Wells Borough Council services
 - c. South East Water
 - d. Water Industry Regulators
 - e. Kent and Medway Resilience Forum (KMRF)
 - f. Care Homes, Schools & Community Stakeholders.
10. The Scrutiny Committee, and therefore any sub-committee or SFI Group, may require Members and Officers of the authority to attend before them to answer questions, and invite other persons to attend meetings.
11. It is the expectation that the final report of the SFI group will be submitted to the Scrutiny Committee for approval and submission to the Executive on 13 May 2026.

Recommendations:

That the Scrutiny Committee agree:

- a. to establish a Short-Focused Inquiry into the Failure in Water Supply in Tunbridge Wells and surrounding areas and subsequent supply interruptions in early January 2026.
- b. to delegate to Officers, in conjunction with members of the SFI group, the arrangement of the Inquiry as outlined in the report.

Appendices:

Appendix 1 – Originally proposed motion: [Motion - Liberal Democrat - Water Supply in Tunbridge Wells.pdf](#)

Background Information:

[Leader calls for government intervention over Tunbridge Wells water disruption - News & Features - Kent County Council](#)

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