

Maidstone Borough Council

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Mr David Hinton
Chief Executive Officer, South East Water

Mr Chris Train, OBE
Chair, South East Water

Via Email

Date: 23 January 2026
Our ref: SJ

Dear Mr Hinton and Mr Train

As I hope you are aware, thousands of residents across our Borough of Maidstone suffered unacceptable water outages over a nine-day period earlier this month. Residents are rightly furious with your company and want answers.

I had hoped that you would be at the meeting of the 14 Kent Council leaders this week given the scale and severity of the disruption across the county. This was a meeting of the most senior council leaders and, with the problems your company caused, it would have been appropriate for you to have been there.

While the media reported 4,500 homes affected, the extension of problems to Coxheath, Linton, Marden and Staplehurst means that around 10,000 homes were without water.

I have engaged with my councillor colleagues across Maidstone Borough Council, many of whom spent significant amounts of time directly supporting their residents / your customers in that time of need, and we have compiled a series of questions that we would like you to answer.

Water supply resilience

It is evident that investment in your system has not kept pace with the age and condition of your infrastructure and growing need; it is therefore not resilient enough to ensure continuity of supply to our communities. This is unacceptable. Following the briefing given to Kent Leaders on 21st January we need you to supply to us details of your:

- Water supply risk assessment, maintenance and investment programme, including the scale of backlogs, so that we can keep our councillors and the public informed concerning the current state of your network and performance.
- Business Continuity and Contingency plans for interruption of water supply, including details of how this has been assessed and signed off by regulators
- Explanation of what caused the outages in January 2026, and your plans to mitigate these risks coming to fruition again.

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- Explanation of why SEW service was so adversely impacted in January following severe weather when that was not the case for areas of the country equally badly affected but served by other providers including in London, the southwest and east of England.

Water stations and supply for vulnerable customers

It is evident that your response to providing alternate water supply was too slow, partly explained by supply chain problems and slow mobilisation, and incompletely implemented. Although some pre-planned large water station locations were used there was a reluctance to set up the range of water stations that our community needed given the rural nature of the area without water supply which meant unacceptable travel times and distances – apparently as a result of vehicles being too large to negotiate local roads, a reluctance by SEW to use community hub locations (although eventually after pressure from MBC this was to some extent addressed) and resistance to accepting mutual aid from the borough council. Your claim that people on your PSR received bottled water within 24 hours was not accurate. So we ask:

- What was your plan for alternate water supply, your assumptions on reasonable travel distances/times, how much of this was delivered successfully and what was not and why and how you will build flexibility into future decision making on which locations to use applying local knowledge from the MBC team.
- What are your plans for improvement particularly for increasing the resilience to outages of institutional settings such as care homes and timely deployment of alternate water supply for vulnerable people to ensure timely deliveries including collaboration with the council to enable use of local knowledge and assets; we appreciate that after Ministerial intervention you have met with our CEO – we need to be assured of your commitment to change, sharing information, using our local assets and innovation in ensuring the most up to date PSR.

Communications

The information provided by SEW in the recent incident was repeatedly inaccurate including on your website and at the range of meetings including TCGs and SCGs. For example, assertions that water stations were open when they weren't, that water had been restored when it hadn't been, your on-line outages map was out of date and there were waits of over an hour through your customer services. Signage of road closures was poor. So, we ask:

- What does SEW have in place to detect leaks and interruptions to supply to ensure as close to real time accurate information for the public as possible e.g. via the website and individual notifications; what investment is being made e.g. in technology to improve this?
- What plans does SEW have to improve its customer services capacity and responsiveness during incidents of widespread lack of supply.
- What is your plan to ensure effective liaison between SEW and KCC relating to road closures so that signage is better.
- What do you plan to do to rebuild trust after the repeated failures.

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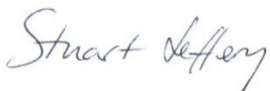
Looking to the future, today's regular and repeated water supply failures have increased the public's scepticism that SEW can be relied on to ensure sufficient water supply within sustainable environmental limits for tomorrow's new homes and business needs. So, we ask:

- What plans do you have in place to ensure that you meet your duty to connect.
- What needs to change to ensure that water providers have adequate involvement in long term strategic spatial planning and development proposals e.g. becoming statutory consultees?

I am sure that you will appreciate that the public are wholly dissatisfied with SEW's performance. Understandably people are questioning why they should pay their bills and why should the executives get bonuses / keep their jobs? So as community leaders we need and want to represent their views and get them answers – as outlined above.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Stuart Jeffery".

Cllr Stuart Jeffery
Leader of Maidstone Borough Council

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