

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of the meeting held on 14 March 2023 at 7.00 pm in Council Chamber, Council Offices, Cecil Street, Margate, Kent.

Present: Councillor Rev. Stuart Piper (Chair); Councillors Fellows, Austin, Boyd, Currie, Coleman-Cooke, Huxley, Keen, Paul Moore, L Piper, Rusiecki, Smith, Tomlinson, Towning and Yates

In Attendance: Councillors Bailey, J Bayford, R Bayford, Garner, Rawf and Shrubbs

441. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from the following Members:

Councillor Leys, substituted by Councillor Rusiecki;
Councillor Wing substituted by Councillor Smith;
Councillor Pat Moore, substituted by Councillor Yates;
Councillor Rattigan, substituted by Councillor Towning.

442. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations made at the meeting.

443. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Councillor Fellows proposed, Councillor Austin seconded and the Members agreed that the minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 16 February 2023 were a correct record.

444. SOUTHERN WATER PRESENTATION

Ms Elizabeth Wickenden and Ms Jacquie Brown addressed the Panel and asked Southern Water representatives the following questions:

- For the December 2022 water outages in Thanet, why have you as a company been so sporadic in how compensation or goodwill payments have been credited to customer accounts and why are there differences in payment amounts.
- Finally why are there still a number of Wimpey Estate customers who are still waiting for their compensation money to be credited to their accounts?
- If developments of 21,000 houses across Thanet receive planning permission. Are Southern Water able to give residents assurances they will be able to deliver a reliable water supply and that sewage spillages into the sea will not increase, given the area already experiences this. And that there will be no negative impacts on communities across the district from water supply and sewage treatment and disposal issues?

The following Members spoke under Council Procedure 20.1:

Councillor Garner;
Councillor Bailey;
Councillor Rawf.

They made the following points:

- Ward Councillors had been approached by their constituents regarding the water supply interruptions in December 2022 and January 2023;
- A large number of residents had not received their compensation payments;
- One resident who had not received their payment had been ill and had just come out of hospital when the interruptions took place. This made them quite vulnerable;
- The infrastructure was not fit for purpose;
- The previous CEO for Southern Water had promised to improve the performance of the water supply system some years back, but no improvements had taken place;
- There had been limited information coming through from Southern Water during these incidents;
- The water bottles supply to affected households had been patchy;
- The three delivery locations for relief supplies were small and busy areas for such deliveries;
- There had been no consistency with the compensation payments;
- The seaweed contamination through sewage spills into the sea meant that the farmers who usually took delivery of the seaweed could not do so as they could not use contaminated seaweed.

Mr Tim McMahon, Director of Water Operations at Southern Water then led his presentation and made the following comments:

- The water pipes which were part of the infrastructure were installed more than 77 years ago. The organisation was working on the short term strategy which would see a change in electricity infrastructure. It was hoped that this would improve the performance of the infrastructure. The system at the Tower was now working fine;
- The long term strategy was that there was a need for an overhaul of the power supply and six months would be required for this work at a cost of about £250k;
- There was also ongoing work on the draft plan for the AM8 to create more salience for the system and this piece of work would be carried out in 2025-2030;
- The December 2022 water supply interruptions affected 12,352 households and 1,043 non households. So far 9,696 households and 1,043 non households had been paid compensation;
- Southern Water had acknowledged their errors during these incidents. They had met communities at meetings to discuss this matter. The organisation would be looking at all the incidents of missed payments and take corrective action;
- Southern Water was trying to improve communication with their customers by improving the content of their website. Feedback received from customers is indicative of improvements made to date;
- With regards to delivery of water bottles during supply interruptions: Southern water would try to improve the delivery locations to ensure that such locations were sited in places that were easily accessible to delivery trucks;
- Then organisation ensured that delivery of water to the most vulnerable customers was done within 12 hours;
- The list of vulnerable customers was kept up to date so that such households do not get missed during emergency incidents;
- With regards to housing development in the district: Southern Water did not have the ability to reject housing development. However the organisation had a duty to work with developers and planners to achieve housing development;
- They can only influence local authorities regarding local planning;
- With regards to impacting seaweed contamination through sewer spillage; Southern Water could pay compensation for such contamination;
- With regards to sewage at sea: Southern Water had invested £5 million in the last 5 years, which had seen the system at the Margate station being manned 24/7;
- There were various other activities still be done which include stopping rainwater from flowing into the sewer system as well as increasing the capacity of the

infrastructure, (a PowerPoint presentation is attached as Annex 1 to this minute item).

The Chair said that hoping that moving forward the channels of communication between Southern Water and its customers would be improved. The Chair then invited the Panel to discuss that matter. Members made comments and asked questions as follows:

- One Member said that it was important to look at the pace of housing development in relation to water infrastructure development. It appeared as if infrastructure development was lagging behind;
- Another Member said that there was a failure in the back up system during the water supply interruptions. This had also been the case with the sewage spill incidents. Southern Water should have looked at the back up system after the first incident;
- They further asked whether Southern Water could assure the Panel that there would be a full review of the entire system and that these failures would not recur and if the organisation did not foresee these problems? Was this not evidence of long term under investment;
- One Member asked if the fixes carried by Southern Water had resolved the problems and if they were prepared to guarantee to residents and businesses that these incidents would not recur;
- Another Member asked the following question:
 - Given that the water industry in the UK was privatised way back in 1989, why have there been multiple wastewater and sewage leaks at Foreness pumping station in Thanet since 2017 under Southern Water's ownership? Is this unacceptable situation due to a lack of infrastructure investment by the company over 30 plus years and the company's culture of prioritising payments to its shareholders rather than actually looking after its customers' needs?
- Another Member thanked Southern Water for their apology to Thanet residents for the inconveniences caused by the multiple water supply shortages. They asked if there were any staff that had been made to account and reprimanded for the incidents that occurred in Broadstairs and Margate;
- There had been twenty such incidents since 2018. They further asked if Southern Water would be willing to come before the Panel to report on progress made regarding the proposed plans that had been presented to the Panel;
- Did Southern Water have the ability to comment on housing planning applications, particularly that 21,400 housing units were going to be developed in Thanet?
- Considering that Southern Water were providing a vital resource on a monopoly basis what recourse did residents have for their failures?
- Infrastructure at Foreness was designed years back and these pumps had been working 24 hours a day over their threshold limit;
- Fishermen would like to engage Southern Water in discussion;
- Did Southern Water have any improvement plans based on current and future households and where such plans resilient?
- What was the level of engagement between Southern Water and the Council's Planning Committee on major planning applications?
- One Member thanked Southern Water for the presentation and for supporting volunteer groups with the cleaning of beaches. They further asked when the organisation was proposing to robing to Thanet surface water control models that can be used by developers;
- Another Member asked if there had been a root and branch review of emergency measures conducted by Southern Water, in case of future failures and whether the back up system was now fail-safe.

Mr McMahon responded to Members comments and questions as follows:

- The organisation was working on increasing and expanding the network;
- They were also modelling and understanding the impact of housing development to inform the 2025-30 infrastructure development;
- There was a need to work with developers to prevent rainwater going into the sewer system;
- It was worth noting that the net profit was not necessarily going to the shareholders but rather into paying off debt;
- Currently there were equity injection discussions ongoing and these would be the biggest in the industry;
- At the early onset of housing development, Southern Water would work with the developers to confirm water supply infrastructure. They also work with the developer during the implementation of the development project;
- Southern Water invested in infrastructure by replacing old generators and connectors with new ones;
- There were no quick fixes to infrastructure development. It would take years and the organisation was working on investment;
- Long term investment over the last 30 years had achieved some marked improvement as the current system had ensured that it was less likely to have less pressure, leakages and outages in the system as compared to 30 years ago;
- Currently there were no tools in the industry that could be used to predict where pipe bursts could occur;
- Before privatisation of this sector in the 1980s the performance of the industry was bad as compared to now;
- Waste water was now being treated properly. However discharges of waste was not an acceptable situation (whether this was legal or not);
- The manning of Broadstairs and Margate stations 24/7 was an industry leading model and this took a lot of work to set it up;
- The organisation was currently conducting trials and studies to reduce these interruptions occurring in the future;
- Staff had been reprimanded for the December 2022-January 2023 incidents;

- The organisation would be happy to come back to the Panel in 15 months time with a report on progress made regarding improving performance;
- Southern Water officers were going to check with their colleagues after the meeting whether the organisation was being firm enough with housing developers particularly in the case of the 21,400 housing units to be built in Thanet;
- With regards to corporate failure; Southern Water would be asked to pay penalties by the regulator for any transgressions;
- It was easier to comment on the impact by large housing development and usually the engagement with developers would be from the start of the project. However it was harder to illustrate the impact on smaller housing development projects;
- Scarcity of water was becoming a reality due to climate change, it was therefore important that tough decision be made around the issue of bigger water supply infrastructure;
- The Drainage Waste Management Plan was now coming on board and this would work in a similar way to the Water Management Plan, which worked on a 90 year projection. This Plan would be an additional cost to the customers. It was therefore important for Southern Water to ensure that the costs were affordable;
- With regards to surface water control, all developers would have to comply with government legislation from 2024;
- Trials that the organisation was conducting were meant to understand how Southern Water could manage and reduce discharges using the most economic way which customers could afford;

- The organisation would continue to support volunteer groups who clean the beaches;
- Southern Water would be working over the next six months to improve power supply at the Rumsfeld Tower Station. This should reduce the risk of outages;
- The events procedure had been changed and Southern Water were now working with resilience forums to improve joint conversations;
- Every big event was now being reviewed to learn some lessons.

The Chair thanked Southern Water for their presentation and thereafter the Panel agreed to invite Southern Water representatives back to a future meeting in a year's time to receive a report on the improvement progress.

445. TDC AND PARISH & TOWN COUNCILS COLLABORATION WORKING PARTY REPORT

Councillor Currie, Chair of the Collaboration Working Party introduced the working party report. He thanked the working party members Cllr Austin, Cllr Bailey and Cllr Fellows for the work they did to gather evidence and produce the report. Councillor Currie also thanked Parish and Town Council representatives, Cabinet Members and senior officers who attended the various sessions where the working party gathered evidence that was used to come up with this report.

This review was an interesting exercise for Members as they got an insight into what Parish and District Councillors as well as officers thought about how they could improve effective working between the District and Parishes. A number of ideas were identified and added to the report, many of which were proposed by all parties. If implemented Members felt that this would successfully lead to a more effective approach for collaborative working for the benefit of the local residents around the District.

Councillor Currie further thanked TDC officers for their input to support this review and officers from Democratic Services for their invaluable help in putting this report together. With the ever tightening of budgets year on year Members felt that if the recommendations could be implemented, this would hopefully make a big difference on how services were delivered for our local communities.

Councillor Currie proposed, Councillor Keen seconded and Members agreed to forward the report and recommendations to Cabinet for decision.

446. REVIEW OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2022/23

Members noted the report.

447. FORWARD PLAN AND EXEMPT CABINET DECISION LIST

Members noted the report.

Meeting concluded: 8.45 pm