

Date: 2 June 2026
Your Ref: -
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Rt Hon Emma Reynolds MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
2 Marsham Street
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Dear Secretary of State

Open letter - demand for South East Water to be put into special administration

Enough is enough. The appalling performance of South East Water in our district and across Kent has to be tackled and tackled now.

Yet again our residents, many of them vulnerable, businesses and livestock owners have been left without water during the hottest days of the year so far.

And we've not even reached the peak summer months.

As if that was not bad enough, South East Water's response to the crisis has been an abject failure save for those workers on the frontline battling to fix failures that are not down to them.

To rub salt into already open wounds, this failing water company has failed to learn the lessons from previous crises.

This is just one of a number of letters we've been forced to write in recent months – the tally is growing. We're grateful to Water Minister Emma Hardy for her reply last week.

This letter is to demand the government urgently assesses whether the continued failings of South East Water now meet the s24 performance grounds for placing the company into special administration – effectively bringing this vital service back into public ownership.

We think it does.

What is the case for special administration?

There is a growing body of evidence that South East Water has contravened its statutory and licence obligations in a manner sufficiently serious that it is inappropriate for the company to continue to hold its appointment.

This is not a request made lightly. The council recognises special administration is a high-threshold intervention.

If repeatedly failing to deliver fresh drinking water across its area does not merit such an intervention, what will?

The evidence is there:

- a cumulative pattern of failure evidenced by the number and duration of incidents across Kent and East Sussex
- findings by the myriad regulators charged with ensuring South East Water fulfills its most basic duties
- parliamentary scrutiny that has led to the resignations of both the company's chairman and elusive chief executive

Taken together, it points to a persistent failure of supply resilience across the area covered by South East Water, a failure of infrastructure stewardship, repeated failures in customer protection especially for the most vulnerable, a failure in emergency response and a failure in the delivery of the company's own water resources planning assumptions.

The other consequences

Setting aside all of the issues associated with the prolonged lack of a supply of fresh water and the huge response that has to be stood up by the blue light services, the NHS, the county council and the district and borough councils at great cost to the taxpayer to cover for the failings of a private company, there are other huge strategic issues at play.

As Leader of Canterbury City Council, I, along with my Cabinet, am committed to our government's push for more affordable housing to be built so people can have safe and secure homes with all of the benefits that brings.

Those people also need an economy that is growing and is delivering new jobs.

We're confident that our draft Local Plan, which has just been consulted on under Regulation 19, can deliver both homes and jobs in a way that is sustainable and puts infrastructure front and centre.

In fact, we're proud of the plan we have produced after extensive consultation with the public. However, the performance of South East Water is needlessly chipping away at people's confidence in the Local Plan process and the ability of the water companies to deliver reliable and resilient services.

We have developed our plan in good faith. But we, and other councils, are in a precarious situation if water companies are not honest with us about their capacity.

We are fully aware infrastructure planning must align with housing growth, and that South East Water will seek to update its Water Resources Management Plan (WRMP) and business planning assumptions accordingly.

The concern, however, is the company's recent and repeated failures call into question both its present ability to maintain reliable supply under foreseeable demand conditions and its credibility in delivering the future resilience on which growth assumptions depend.

For that reason, this letter is not simply a complaint about poor service.

This adds to our view that South East Water is not fit to continue without structural intervention.

Our evidence base

The evidence is plain to see. It demands that urgent action is taken to stop history repeating itself time and again including:

- repeated and widespread systemic failures in supply affecting thousands of people at a time - these failures go to the heart of the company's core obligations to maintain a reliable and efficient water supply system
- failure to protect vulnerable customers – they cannot identify them, fail to deliver to them and need the public and voluntary sector to step in and support a private business at a cost to the taxpayer
- an inability to effectively engage with the county's emergency arrangements before, during and after an incident – when will South East Water learn the lessons from previous incidents?
- scathing criticism from MPs who have consistently voiced their concerns that South East Water has demonstrated poor escalation processes, insufficient alternative water provision and inconsistent communications during crises – see below
- Ofwat's existing enforcement investigation into whether South East Water has failed to develop and maintain an efficient water supply system - we are not the only ones to notice this pattern of failure – again see below
- South East Water's inability to deliver its own Water Resources Management Plan (WRMP) as evidenced by your own department, the Environment Agency and Ofwat (Annex A summarises key schemes from the South East Water WRMP business plan and their progress, or lack of, and the direct impact on Kent's residents)

Ofwat has noted that South East Water was the worst performer in England and Wales for water supply interruptions in 2022–23, with an average interruption per household of 3 hours, 2 minutes and 21 seconds against a performance commitment level of 5 minutes and 45 seconds.

The findings of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee in its 1 May 2026 report are also highly material.

The committee concluded South East Water had comprehensively failed to deliver for consumers, including failures to identify and monitor risks, failures to maintain assets, failure to invest in wider infrastructure to remove single points of failure and improve interconnectivity, poor escalation

processes, insufficient alternative water supplies, inconsistent communications and failure to support vulnerable customers.

The committee further stated the company still lacked a crisis communications strategy and that these failures had had an extremely negative and dangerous impact on more than 300,000 people since 2020.

In conclusion

The cumulative evidence points to serious and systemic failure across operational performance, customer protection, emergency response, resilience planning and infrastructure delivery.

The combined effect of repeated supply failures, inadequate support for vulnerable residents, weak data and communication systems, poor integration into emergency response structures, WRMP under-delivery and live regulatory concerns now raises a legitimate question as to whether South East Water's apparent contraventions are sufficiently serious that it may be inappropriate for the company to continue to hold its appointment.

If you disagree with this premise, I would ask why and what more, in terms of evidence, you would you need to change your mind.

The public has had enough. And so have we.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in dark blue ink, appearing to read 'Alan Baldock', written over a white background.

ClIr Alan Baldock
Leader, Canterbury City Council

cc:

Chief Inspector of Drinking Water Marcus Rink

Ian Coucher, Chairman of the Water Services Regulation Authority (Ofwat)

Rt Hon Steve Reed MP, Secretary of State for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

Emma Hardy MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State - Minister for Water and Flooding]

Rosie Duffield, MP for Canterbury

Sir Roger Gale, MP for Herne Bay and Sandwich

Alistair Carmichael MP, Chair of the Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs Select Committee

Annex A: Kent WRMP / Business Plan Scheme Delivery Assessment (2022–2026)

This annex summarises key South East Water WRMP and business plan schemes affecting Kent, focusing on those expected to contribute to resilience within the 2022–2026 period. It sets out the available evidence on planned outcomes and current delivery status based on regulator assessments and published material.

Scheme	Description	WRMP Expectation	Current Status (Evidence)	Overall Status
Bewl / Darwell Scheme (Bewl WTW expansion and transfers)	Expansion of Bewl Water Treatment Works and associated transfer infrastructure.	Delivery anticipated within AMP7/early transition to AMP8 (around 2025 trajectory).	Regulators confirm delivery forecast for March 2025 has been delayed; further funding and extended delivery timeline now expected.	Delayed
Surrey Hills to Fleet Transfer	Major transfer scheme to improve network resilience and interconnectivity	Included as a resilience scheme within AMP7 period.	Regulators state scheme has been significantly delayed.	Delayed
Cookham WTW Output Restoration	Restoration of deployable output contributing to supply-demand balance.	Assumed operational within WRMP supply forecasts.	Long-term outage continues and output remains below forecast.	Underperforming
Coggins Mill / Forest Row / Weir Wood Output Recovery	Programmes to restore or increase output at existing sources.	Expected to deliver improved deployable output across WRMP period.	Ongoing works; regulators report insufficient delivery detail and continuing deficits.	Incomplete / ongoing
Aylesford Newsprint Source	Retention and/or recovery of source contributing to Kent supply.	Assumed available within WRMP supply balance.	Temporary reduction in output due to outage; recovery plan required.	Underperforming
Broad Oak Reservoir (Kent)	Strategic reservoir scheme to increase storage capacity.	Long-term scheme (target ~2033) but key early milestones expected in period.	Regulatory milestone delayed (gate review pushed from Dec 2025 to Sept 2026); still in planning stage.	Delayed (early stage)

Reculver Desalination (Kent)	Proposed desalination scheme for additional supply.	Identified in WRMP but not expected to complete in period.	No evidence of construction commencement within 2022–2026 window.	Not delivered
Butler WTW (Maidstone Groundwater Scheme)	Development of additional groundwater resource.	Scheduled within WRMP programme.	Reported as nearing completion.	Near completion

Key delivery risks identified by regulators regarding the WRMP

Supply-demand balance significantly below WRMP forecast.

Leakage remains above forecast for multiple years.

Delays and outages reducing deployable output.

Concerns raised about ability to deliver supply-side schemes on time.