

Emma Hardy MP

Parliamentary Under-Secretary (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs)

Matthew Pennycook MP

Minister of State (Housing, Communities and Local Government)

House of Commons
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Letter sent via email



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Dear Ministers Hardy and Pennycook,

We are writing to seek your assurance that Government fully understands the scale and urgency of the water supply challenges facing communities in Wealden.

Residents across the district are served by South East Water (SEW), whose repeated interruptions and risks to supply have undermined confidence in the resilience of this essential service. While recent incidents are often presented as exceptional and we recognise that climate change is increasing pressure on water systems, these risks have been known for many years and should have been planned for accordingly. The underlying challenges are longstanding and well documented through successive Water Resource Management Plans (WRMPS). Local Planning Authorities rely on WRMPs to set out the infrastructure needs in respect of water supply through their Infrastructure Delivery Plans. Despite this, there remains a clear gap between the identification of these needs and the timely delivery by SEW of the infrastructure needed to meet them.

At the same time, local authorities are being required through national policy, including the National Planning Policy Framework, to plan positively for significant levels of housing growth. We have done so in good faith. Over many years we have:

- Worked constructively with South East Water and other infrastructure providers
- Applied increasingly stringent water efficiency standards in new development
- Safeguarded land for strategic water infrastructure, including a new reservoir at Arlington

However, the infrastructure planning and regulatory system is not keeping pace with either operational pressures or planned growth or the effects of the climate crisis. The expected delivery of a new reservoir has been repeatedly delayed—from an anticipated date of 2036, to a broader 2025–2045 window, and most recently to a 2041–2075 window with a target date of 2057. This continued deferral significantly and justifiably undermines public confidence in both infrastructure delivery and the realism of growth assumptions.

We are clear that the planning system should not act as a substitute for the regulation of the water industry. Rather, if local planning authorities are to plan positively for growth, the regulatory system must ensure that water companies produce credible, deliverable and timely infrastructure plans that align with that growth. At present, the widening deleterious effects of the gap between planned development, operational resilience and the delivery of strategic water infrastructure is being borne by local communities and the planning system.

We therefore ask Ministers to:

- Confirm what steps will be taken by DEFRA, MHCLG, Ofwat, the Environment Agency and the Drinking Water Inspectorate to ensure that South East Water's Water Resource Management Plan, business plan and delivery programme are aligned with the scale and pace of housing growth required through national policy and local plans
- Require South East Water to provide a clear and deliverable programme for improving resilience in Wealden, including the Arlington reservoir and interim supply measures
- Provide assurance that the regulatory framework will ensure timely delivery of critical infrastructure, rather than allowing further slippage beyond the planning horizon

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with Ministers, South East Water and the relevant regulators to discuss these issues and to ensure that a coordinated and deliverable approach is in place.

Yours faithfully,



Cllr Rachel Millward

Leader of the Council and Culture, Community and Communications Portfolio Holder



Cllr Ian Tysh

Planning & Environment Portfolio Holder