Southern Water Working Group Meeting

9.30am on Monday 24 April 2023
Via Teams

Attendees:-

	Representing
Chris Bending (Director of Place, Wealden District Council)	East Sussex
Karl Roberts (Director of Growth, Arun District Council)	West Sussex
Simon Kennedy (Strategic Environmental Planning Manager Partnership for South Hampshire) Anne Shattock (Basingstoke and Deane - involved as a non-PfSH Hampshire authority)	Hampshire

1. Introductions – including partner updates since last meeting

CB welcomed everyone to the meeting. He explained Surrey and Kent were invited to this Group, albeit the Southern Water catchment is a relatively small part of their regions. That said Southern Water are also slow to respond to those Councils so we will keep the door open to them should they wish to be represented in this Group. The vast majority of issues seem to affect East / West Sussex and Hampshire.

CB then set out a brief background to the issues Wealden DC is currently experiencing.

<u>East Sussex – Chris Bending</u>

East Sussex takes a significant element of the growth, leading to issues with Southern Water, which cascades down to Wealden, and other localities. Wealden has met a few times with Southern Water, one meeting included a local Parish Council and MP (albeit it was disappointing to hear their responses to our MP at that meeting, were different to the responses they have provided to us separately).

The responses we received a month after our last meeting on 17 March 2023 were very disappointing. At this meeting Southern Water advised that out of a total of 208 developments, they had identified 8 priority, short-term, “quick wins” that needed their urgent attention across Sussex. We asked for a list of those specific 8 projects which they promised to provide, but unfortunately have since confirmed they would not be sharing at the present time. They also shared with us a very quick on-screen commentary of a new planning consultation response document they are working on. It sounded promising in terms of being more helpful with planning responses and being written in easy to read, public-friendly way. Again, they promised to share this

document after the meeting, but we have not received it to date. We will therefore continue to push for that piece of work.

We have a further follow up meeting on 8th June 2023. Whilst it seems that Southern Water's rhetoric and PR has improved, sadly their responsiveness in providing detailed information has not and it continues to be a frustrating process. Delivery on the ground seems to be even further lagging behind.

Hampshire – Simon Kennedy

The issues we are experiencing derive from significant under-investment by Southern Water. Southern Water attended a joint Committee meeting in October 2022 and, as with Wealden's experience, we found their PR to be very good. They have people who talk a good talk and are passionate about delivering a better service, but corporately they cannot move. The politicians certainly gave them a hard time at that Committee meeting.

Pathfinder projects appear to be the slowest to be moved and we are still awaiting updates around the nitrogen issues and the potential royal ascent of the upgrades – excuses appear to be Southern Water's default response. We are therefore hoping to apply more pressure to Southern Water through this wider group of authorities. The model being employed in terms of investment is not working and we need to talk to Government (albeit recognising that the strength of this group is to work beyond party politics)

From our experiences to date, Southern Water as an organisation is certainly very difficult to work with.

Hampshire – Anne Shattock

Our region is slightly different to others, in that we are covered by various water companies, including Southern Water. However this is an area with SSIs and very vocal residents. Members are very cynical about Southern Water. Given we do not have huge growth we do not feature as priorities in Southern Water's eyes. We are having trouble engaging with Southern Water – we have requested meetings and have asked specific questions without success. We are therefore very happy to be part of this Group to help improve that. We also sit on the Water Quality Working Group which could also be helpful here.

CB added that whilst ideally we do not want this Group to get too big (no more than 5-6 people) we could add a few more voices if it is deemed helpful. CB also offered to share with AS the contact details of Wealden's more responsive contacts at Southern Water if it helps.

Some of the issues around our draft Water Resource Management Plan on supply are causing uncertainty amongst Members and impacting on our Local Plan, so we need more definite statements from Southern Water to alleviate these fears.

West Sussex – Karl Roberts

In Arun we have had a couple of meetings with Southern Water and have been getting the MPs involved to apply more pressure. Again, during these meetings Southern Water have said all the right things. We subsequently had a second meeting with our Leader where we tried to drill down a bit more into Arun-specific issues – there were lots of nice words but fundamentally nothing has changed, albeit our relationship with them has improved. We have a meeting scheduled at Worthing about planning consultations in a couple of weeks' time which was a direct result of that earlier meeting. This is therefore largely a case of keeping the communications going.

One of the issues we have also experienced, is Southern Water's reluctance to inform us when they have acted on something good. We are also still struggling to get answers around their plans for big infrastructure improvements given the scale of development happening locally, as well as around bathing water quality (with one area sadly recently losing its blue flag status, with understandable community/political tension). From our perspective we are really just trying to keep pushing, however dragging information out is proving to be a painful process.

2. Identification of shared priorities/work areas

CB started the conversation with his initial thoughts on what he believes this Group and in turn the wider Group, might wish to tackle:-

- Planning responses and getting good sight of refining that piece of work. We suspect Southern Water will soon be going to roll out a standard piece of work – this may well be an early win for this Group and will most certainly be well received by Members.
- Data sharing – whilst a broad topic, we are all clearly struggling in getting information from Southern Water. This Group could therefore look at the issues at a more strategic level (eg determine the level with each authority across the whole area, at what time, at what speed to expect certain standards, etc) and to agree our expectations to collectively hold Southern Water to account.
- To gain a better understanding of Southern Water's planned works (eg planning applications against their timescales, so we can cross check with our records (something they are not sharing at the moment)). SK added that he has previously argued this point with them and has since received their growth projections, albeit they are not fit for purpose because they are not effective for planned growth. However SK was in agreement of the importance of information sharing, particularly for infrastructure. Southern Water often ask that a FOI be requested – given we are a public body this is nothing short of obstructive. Perhaps this Group could agree collective standards with Southern Water such as not having to request via an FOI to receive certain information? This Group potentially has the platform to put politicians in a room which would help hold that agreement up against Southern Water.

It was agreed that the benefit of this Group certainly creates more power in making a request collectively, as it is on behalf of a wider geographical area to get that information. Ultimately if that request is not agreed or fulfilled by Southern Water, it then provides an opportunity to collectively involve a much larger number of MPs.

SK referred to the example of CSO mapping. Currently Southern Water map through "Lifebuoy" which reports direct routes into bathing waters and does not cover indirect flows (Southern Water do not report on raw sewage issues flowing from further inland). Thames Water publish every CSO – there is no reason why Southern Water could not provide the same. SK also shared a link to an open consultation document (Continuous water quality monitoring and event duration monitoring - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)), referring to question 2 about monitoring water quality near discharge points, as a good example of the type of consultation document that could force them to action. If we agree our set of priorities, we can then share them with the wider Stakeholder Group.

Once we have liaised with Southern Water directly, this could then step into a wider conversation with the EA/OFWAT/DLUC as Southern Water's regulators, by way of a quiet voice in the background. Again this message would certainly have more impact coming from a wider collective group.

The group had a discussion about alternative ways of applying pollical pressure to SW to deliver action once we have agreed priorities in place. It was agreed that we need to find ways of doing this that hold together a collection of authorities under different political control, but with a shared desire for action.

ACTION: CB agreed to put together a list of the priorities to share as headlines with the wider Group, for the wider Group to then endorse for us to take away and put into place. This will also help towards getting formal recognition from Southern Water around these groups.

3. Role of Southern Water in these discussions

Agreed that we need to get the principles/priorities agreed with the Wider Group first, before meeting with Southern Water. This will help towards gaining recognition from Southern Water of the need for a meaningful conversation to move forward. We would probably need to do the same with the EA/OFWAT eventually.

4. Membership of the Working Group

Agreed that we would continue to try and encourage Kent and Surrey to join this group. Should any other people wish to participate, they are more than welcome to contact CB.

5. Next steps

- Send out invitations to the Wider Group for a meeting around June 2023, which consists of Members and Officers. Given the impending Election, we need to be conscious that some Members may not be standing or re-elected, in which case new participants might wish to come forward.
- KR has a meeting with Southern Water imminently. He will continue to raise awareness of this Group.
- AS to be provided with contact names at Southern Water to engage locally on specific issues. SK to pass on his contacts. Given Wealden has a meeting

on 8th June 2023, AS to let CB know if she would like him to push this on her behalf, should she get no interaction from Southern Water in the meantime.