Southern Water Working Group Meeting

2pm on Thursday 4 January 2024
Via Teams

Attendees:-

	Representing
Chris Bending (Director of Place, Wealden District Council) ("CB")	East Sussex
Karl Roberts (joint interim Chief Executive, Arun District Council) ("KR")	West Sussex
David Illsley (Policy & Conservation Manager, New Forest National Park Authority) - standing in for Simon Kennedy and Mark Williams ("DI")	Hampshire
Fjola Stevens (Divisional Manager, Development Management) (FS")	Chichester District Council
Steve Court (Senior Stakeholder Engagement Manager) ("SC")	Southern Water
Sue Cobb (Stakeholder Engagement Manager - East Sussex) ("SCO")	Southern Water
Kellie Eldridge (PA to Chris Bending) – notetaker	

Apologies

Simon Kennedy, Mark Williams

Introductions

Introductions were made amongst attendees. CB started the meeting by providing Southern Water with a general background of the objectives of this Group and indeed that of the wider Stakeholder Group. He emphasized the Group's willingness to have constructive conversations with Southern Water so we can all work better together and help each other in the interests of good partnership working.

SC provided a bit of background to his role (ie his remit is to look after Southern Water's engagement across the entire region), accompanied by SCO who is the engagement stakeholder manager for East/West Sussex. Given SCO's length of service at Southern Water and her expert knowledge in the area, he felt it would be beneficial if she also participated in the meeting today.

SC emphasized that attending these Working and Stakeholder Groups will not replace any individual meetings Southern Water has with respective organisations – they will continue. However groups like these are an ideal opportunity for Southern Water to engage with organisations collectively, thereby avoiding any misunderstandings or miscommunication repercussions.

Southern Water is looking at various ways to engage with LAs on a county basis. One idea is to form their own group, similar to this one – a group comprising of local authority CEOs, Leaders/Cabinet Members to meet on a quarterly basis where they can provide them with an updated generalised overview of what is going on in Southern Water.

Initial topic ideas for engagement include:-

- Clear rivers and seas plan – Southern Water is looking at a wider plan to reduce reliance on CSOs. Nick Mills and Niall McNabb are looking at CSOs, rivers and seas – it would be good to get Nick Mills along to talk to our Stakeholder Group to go through Southern Water's plans.
- Planning element and future growth – Katy Taylor, Chief Customer Officer, could also come along to our future Stakeholder meetings covering topics such as Southern Water's 5 year business plan[1]; their next management plan due to be implemented in April 2025; separate surface water systems; sustainable urban drainage; permeable surface water, etc.

Work from this Southern Water group could in turn, feed into the workings of our LPA Working/ Stakeholder Groups.

Southern Water's new CEO, Laurence Gosden, has revamped a lot of their executive team and his focus is the company's turnaround plan, based on comments from the last investigation. Since that investigation Southern Water has achieved 98% of what was asked of them, and this comprises of 4 pillars:-

- environmental improvements
- health and safety for staff
- improved customer service
- water resources

There are big issues around water neutrality and Southern Water is working on that with their catchment teams. They are also focussing on streamlining their internal communications, where teams can work better together and share knowledge (less points of contact will make it easier to get the right people talking to each other).

In terms of water resources, given we are a hugely water stressed area, Southern Water is looking at various projects such as rain water harvesting, recycling (currently being piloted in Hampshire) and possibly desalination.

CB added that whilst our Working/Stakeholder Groups have an interest in water supply/neutrality, the Groups are more focused on addressing foul water issues as opposed to supply. SC appreciated this steer of direction and will take this on board going forward.

[1] Southern Water's 5 year business plan has been submitted to OFWAT and is under review. A draft determination is due April/May time, with a final determination of the plan set for Dec 2024 with a view to starting in March/April 2025

Feedback from CB

CB went on to provide an outline of the struggles Wealden and other local authorities are facing:-

- data and data sharing – we are really struggling to understand what Southern Water is planning and where. We have previously asked for information to check that Southern Water's assumptions match our assumptions in our areas. Southern Water has requested we submit an FOI each time we need such information – this is not in the interests of good partnership working. We would like to develop an area of standard information sharing for both parties. For example, Wealden has also discovered anomalies with Southern Water's list of developments going through the planning process – some sites are out of date (eg where sites have been duplicated given a subsequent change of name) which Southern Water would not necessarily know about. However we as a local authority would know instantly and could help cleanse that data. We are therefore looking to establish a better way of doing that going forward. **Action**: SC acknowledged this and agreed to talk to his colleague, Morgan McCarthy, in this regard. CB also agreed to compile a list of information that local authorities would find useful, adding that local authorities also hold data that Southern Water might need – if Southern Water can think of any information to aid in both organisations working together better, he would be happy to look at that. This relationship is ultimately two-way. SC agreed that a wish list from respective LA organisations would be a good way forward.
- Planning consultation responses – we have been advised in previous meetings with Southern Water, that the team has been working on improving the language in documentation to the public, by removing excessive technical jargon to make it easier to understand - this we are yet to see in full. However Southern Water also needs to be really clear in communicating the follow up actions on those responses, to ensure consistency and to gain the public's trust. Issues around the development management side as opposed to planning, appear to be what the public find confusing. SC acknowledged this and added that Southern Water is looking to become a statutory consultee. CB highlighted the letter the Stakeholder Group recently sent to Government lobbying for this, which SC was grateful to hear.
- Connections between where Southern Water is planning upgrade works – we have seen Southern Water's business plans but we need a comprehensive list of projects planned for our district and where Southern Water has identified the requirements. Language used when communicating with the public also needs to be more relatable to smaller scale projects (people can see the business plan but they cannot akin it to their own personal situation). People do not know if/where works are taking place in their area. As a LA we can help deliver that message. SC replied that Southern Water is looking to create a regular business update specific for each County on works for capital schemes/renovations etc. They have a Customer Insight Team who talk to thousands of customers and Southern Water is looking to use them to feed into their engagement programme to let people know what they are actually doing. Higher level engagement opportunities such as meeting this Group today, are also great for this cause.

Southern Water's social media team – CB referred to a recent post from Southern Water indicating a tone of self-promotion, which he noticed has subsequently been deleted. He suggested posts like that do not help Southern Watern in building the public's perception/trust. He politely suggested that Southern Water concentrates on the fundamentals of what really matters to the public. SC thanked CB for this feedback and will liaise with his team.

Feedback from KR

KR echoed what CB says re: messaging about what is being proposed. All LAs have their own particular examples (eg in Arun there was a £20m investment that we did not know about until we saw the press release). In the interests of partnership working, we can help if we know information (as opposed to trawling through email traffic, where that brings with it the risk of potential conflicting messages).

However there are also problem areas where a solution has not yet been identified by Southern Water. People want to know of Southern Water's plans (eg Barnham where there has been a longstanding issue with rain getting into the system and causing problems, yet in all that time no one has confirmed what the solution is/what is going to happen). County-wide comms are a good starting point – the fundamentals around comms being what Southern Water is doing, the plans they working on and whether there is something in the pipeline. SC referred to Southern Water's surface water management plan – surface water is not a water company's issue solely – local flood authorities have an element of responsibility as well – it is all about stopping water at source and slowing the flow down (eg slow release water butts, rain gardens, etc). Individuals can also take actions themselves to improve the situation but there needs to be very careful messaging in this regard. CB added that whilst LAs may be open to working on some of these solutions and supporting these messages, it needs to be handled very delicately due to the current general feeling of residents – politicians will also take some convincing. We therefore need Southern Water to demonstrate what they are doing, before we convey that message - SC acknowledged this.

KR referred back to the local issues at Barnham as a good example (with surface water overcharging the system and the repercussions of this for Southern Water and residents in the local area) – fundamentally the public is interested in the solution. SC added that their Taskforce team is working on ideas to keep the surface water out of the combined system such as sustainable gardens (which has been proven in the past to have an effect), looking at misconnections, obtaining powers to fix private parts of the network, sealing pipes, etc. **ACTION**: SC to ask someone from that Taskforce team to attend a Stakeholder Group meeting to provide an update on the schemes/initiatives/pilots they are working on.

CB also acknowledged that this is not entirely Southern Water's problem to answer – all organisations need to come together on this. The Stakeholder Group could be a good platform to bring experts in to talk about what Southern Water's plans are. SCO referred to the waste water treatment visits Southern Water organised recently for Members in East Sussex, which were well received and increased their overall understanding/knowledge/awareness of the issues Southern Water face. Southern Water is also looking to conduct educational tours for school children – basically

looking to get various different organisations/residents groups involved to show them where their money is being invested. **ACTION**: SCO to look at extending these visits to West Sussex and Hampshire.

Feedback from FS

FS added waste water treatment visits would go down well with her Members. However an understanding of who we should be contacting for advice would also be helpful. In terms of comms, the feedback from her Members is that they would like more comms from infrastructure planners, separately from the business/profits. Whilst sharing data is important, there needs to be clearer messaging about what it means (eg gaining a better understanding of waste water treatment work in line with weather changes for example). Some data may be from the EA, some from Southern Water. There is generally a feeling of a lack of understanding from Members on pockets of issues, as opposed to individual issues (eg how you calculate the capacity of waste water treatment works – we just need a simple paper explaining how this works which would massively help planners, Councillors and the general public alike). It would also be useful to have a core list of key contacts – even if it's just for the Stakeholder Group's eyes only – at the moment everybody gravitates to the same Southern Water staff, because they are the only people they know of at Southern Water.

We also have an issue with mixed messaging (eg rumours that Southern Water is considering re-beds around Chichester waste water works) resulting in questions being asked and rumours circulating. We would welcome better clarification from Southern Water in this regard.

Feedback from David Illsley

DI echoed the need for a contact list, suggesting Southern Water may also need a contact list from each LA if that helps too.

He also felt the newsletter idea on a County-wide basis would be helpful.

In terms of engaging with various LAs in one forum, the Partnership for South Hampshire brings 12 LAs together across South Hampshire. It has a joint committee comprising Council Leaders where they have previously invited guest speakers such as Natural England, the EA and Southern Water. There is also the officer-level Natural Environment Group (of which DI is the chair). The Partnership is aware of the provisions in the Levelling Up & Regeneration Act 2023 to upgrade treatment works in affected nutrient catchments to the 'Technically Achievable Limit' (TAL) by 2030 and awaits the list of confirmed treatment works by the end of January 2024. These planned upgrades will then be factored into Natural England's updated Nutrient Budget calculators for the affected catchments (including the Solent nutrient budget calculator and the Itchen phosphate budget calculator).

SC added that if there are other forums that Southern Water could tap into, that everyone should use him as the central point of contact, so Southern Water can decide which meetings would be the most beneficial for them to join. Southern

Water are getting requests from so many organisations – they simply do not have the resources to attend all of them.

KR added that what LAs do not know, makes it hard to help Southern Water in managing their Member expectations. Being able to share more information would be extremely beneficial to all parties – it is better for Southern Water to tell us too much as opposed to the other the way round. He implored Southern Water to inform LAs more of what is going on, which in turn will help improve the communication channels and ultimately reduce the volume of emails coming into Southern Water, draining their resources.

Moving Forward

CB suggested that KE liaise with SC/SCO in the coming months to invite them to a future Stakeholder Group meeting. An agenda/topic areas for discussion will be circulated in advance. We will also put together a list of data requirements and start a conversation offline on what data LAs feel would be beneficial to receive, as well as producing a key contact list from both sides.