Southern Water Working Group

12:00 on Monday 24 February 2025
via MS Teams

Notes of meeting

Attendees

- Chris Bending, Director of Place, Wealden District Council (Chair)
- Karl Roberts, Director of Growth, Arun District Council
- Fjola Stevens, Divisional Manager for Development Manager, Chichester District Council
- Ed Sheath, Head of Planning & Environment, East Sussex County Council
- Laura McCulloch, Head of Spatial Planning, Hampshire County Council
- Mike Elkington, Head of Planning Services, West Sussex County Council
- Kellie Eldridge, PA to Corporate Management, Wealden District Council (notetaker)

Apologies

- David Illsley, Policy & Conservation Manager, New Forest National Park Authority

Introductions

Appropriate introductions were made.

Background

CB provided an overview of the main Southern Water LPA Stakeholder Group which was established to address issues around Southern Water's performance in relation to foul water. He explained the region faces significant challenges due to Southern Water's performance. Historically, Councils have found Southern Water's responses to be repetitive corporate rhetoric. The Stakeholder group was formed to amplify their collective voice. Although Southern Water's communication has improved, concerns about their operational performance remain.

CB added that County Councils were initially excluded from the group as the issues were more relevant to planning issues within Districts and Boroughs. However, at the Stakeholder Group meeting on 17 December 2024, it was suggested that County Councils might now benefit from being part of the group, leading to today's meeting invitation. CB also highlighted that Kent County Council is not present despite previous attempts to reach out. If anyone knows a good contact at Kent County Council, please let us know.

CB referred to the Group's priority list (see Appendix A at the end of this document), which is the main focus of the objectives of this Group. This list has been amended a few times since its creation, with some items on that list progressing better than others. CB also referred to the latest letter to Steve Reed MP, for which the Group has not yet received a response, as well as Wealden's website page which provides

comprehensive background information - Southern Water Stakeholder Group - Wealden District Council - Wealden District Council

County Council Involvement

CB asked whether the County Councils felt they would benefit from being part of this group? Responses were as follows:

East Sussex County Council

ESCC explained its work around dealing with companies like Southern Water (such as in its role as the Lead Local Flood Authority). It treads carefully in its planning duty role due to past issues. Southern Water had agreed to regular update meetings, but these have ceased and dialogue has diminished. However there are areas where ESCC have engaged well with Southern Water (eg the Blue Heart project). In terms of the Stakeholder Group's list of priorities, the item most relatable to County Council work is in respect of available information on Southern Water's upgrade works. If Southern Water provided full transparency on their project pipeline, it would be useful. CB added that Wealden has repeatedly outlined the benefits to comparing and validating Southern Water's data with Council data, but corporate barriers from Southern Water persist, which is very frustrating.

West Sussex County Council

WSCC explained it has similar issues to ESCC, with Member concern being around storm overflow and water supply issues. WSCC is willing to engage with agencies like the Environment Agency and other water companies. In September 2023, it had a member development session with Southern Water and the Environment Agency, which led to 6-monthly WSCC Water Summits (a meeting with the Leader, Portfolio Holder and other senior officers, Chichester District Council (representing West Sussex District and Boroughs), as well as the Environment Agency, Southern Water, and others). DEFRA attended the latest meeting and expressed a willingness to work with County at a high level. However operationally, WSCC is not entirely convinced on Southern Water's performance. However in its capacity as a Waste Planning Authority, it treads carefully with planning applications (eg there is a large ongoing project with West Sussex and South Downs National Park). WSCC sees limited benefit in attending the Stakeholder Group but would be interested in full transparency around Southern Water's planned upgrade works. It would be willing to engage with the Group on specific concerns relevant to them.

Hampshire County Council

Hants agreed with ESCC and WSCC's comments. It has been involved with Southern Water through a partnership with South Hampshire focusing on the Solent. They met with Southern Water about 6 months ago as Southern Water were keen to work with Hants as a highways authority, looking into the foul water systems. This was a high level meeting (with Southern Water proposing ambitious ideas such as having water butts at every property in the County) but we have not heard from them since. Hants is interested in being looped into the Stakeholder Group, but as with the other two County Councils, the issues that are relevant to the Group are not necessarily something County deals with on a daily basis (albeit this may become more pertinent come devolution/LGR). There is nervousness about adding County's name to this group, due to the delicate balancing act it has in working with Southern Water.

CB thanked them for their comments. Referring back to the Stakeholder Group's suggestion of involving County and based on what has been discussed today, he suggested the best way forward would be to extend an open invitation to County to attend future meetings should they so wish, as well as share meeting notes. CB also suggested meeting every 6 months or annually in this format, to give County the opportunity to ask questions.

Updated priorities list

CB referred to a meeting that Wealden has tomorrow with Southern Water's Director. This is on the back of CB attending Southern Water's county-wide Stakeholder Engagement sessions, where he has asked three separate times for Southern Water to share data.

KR suggested these Southern Water sessions do tend to feel like a show & tell. They are presented by senior people but there is an apparent lack of action in-between. For example, Southern Water announced works to the Lidsey waste water treatment plant, but the first the Council heard about it was during that county engagement session. Asking for further information feels like a never-ending uphill struggle.

FS added that Chichester has received a fair amount of engagement which may have been spurred on by the pressure Southern Water has been feeling lately.

CB agreed to provide feedback on the Wealden meeting tomorrow, particularly on the issue of Southern Water sharing data on their planned works. It was questioned whether Southern Water's reluctance to cooperate could be simply due to the fact they do not have sufficient data. There certainly appears to be a lack of internal communication and inconsistency of information across the organisation, which is evident in site-specific cases, as well as a high turnover of staff.

Next steps

- The next Stakeholder Group meeting is to be arranged around March/April.
- WDC to chase Steve Reed MP for a reply to the Group's letter.
- Councils within the Stakeholder Group to write to their respective local MPs for their support.
- County Councils to be updated on progress, but not to be formal members of the Stakeholder Group.
- Once received, WDC to share the decision on the discharge condition planning appeal case it previously shared with the group.

APPENDIX A

Southern Water Local Authority Stakeholder Group Priorities
January 2025

1. **Improved Planning Application Consultation Responses**
    a. to work together with SW to improve the quality of SW planning consultation responses;
    b. to improve transparency of SW thinking for the public and clearly set out a tailored response to applications relative to their consenting stage – eg Outline, Reserved Matters, Condition Discharge;
    c. to make a clear link to advice provided to Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) through local plan production;
    d. to collectively lobby for statutory consultee status for SW and the imposition of binding standards on the quality of responses.

2. **Standardised data sharing between SW and LPAs**
    a. to work with SW to agree a standard list of data that should be openly shared with LPAs, without the need for EIR/FOI requests (at expense to all parties).

3. **Complete sewage spill data publication**
    a. Accepting that the mapping at https://www.southernwater.co.uk/our-region/clean-rivers-and-seas-task-force/rivers-and-seas-watch/ is significantly enhanced and the detail on bathing waters is much improved. There remains a lack of information on the impact to the environment from all forms of spills;
    b. We also want to work with SW (and EA/OFWAT/DLUHC as necessary) to ensure that SW publish, live, all data from all sewage spills – not just those from CSOs – e.g. burst pipes, overwhelmed CSOs etc.

4. **Full transparency around all planned upgrade works**
    a. to require SW to set out publicly their planned upgrade works to serve new development – not just the large projects, but all schemes in the SW pipeline;
    b. To work with SW to test the data under 4.a. to compare upgrade works housing delivery projections to identify problems early

5. **To work with the EA, OFWAT and DLUHC to deliver a more joined up and robust enforcement regime**