# MEDIA RELEASE

Wealden District Council

**006/24** **25 January 2024**

## Water regulator agrees to partnership working after criticisms in relation to Southern Water

The watchdog responsible for regulating the water and sewerage industry has pledged to work more closely with local authorities across the south coast to hold Southern Water to account.

OFWAT, the Water Services Regulation Authority, agreed to better partnership working with local authorities at a recent meeting of the Southern Water Stakeholder Group, set up to put pressure on Southern Water in light of pollution and flooding concerns.

The pledge by OFWAT came following criticisms by councils that the watchdog has not been effective in holding Southern Water to account.

The Southern Water Stakeholder Group was initiated and is co-ordinated by Wealden District Council and includes representatives from more than 24 local authorities from the New Forest to Folkestone.

At its recent meeting this week, the Stakeholder Group was joined by Paul Hickey from OFWAT as well as representatives from Southern Water.

Council officials said responses from Southern Water were continuously slow and unacceptable and the company failed to deliver promised upgrades. They asked OFWAT what their local authorities could do to expedite complaints about Southern Water and how OFWAT carried out compliance checks against the company.

There were also criticisms of OFWAT that it was not monitoring Southern Water closely enough and checking in to see if the water company was working efficiently. They said a much clearer understanding was needed of how councils can work with OFWAT to resolve problems and called on the water regulator to help local authorities rather than waiting until something went wrong. They also want reassurance from OFWAT that water companies such as Southern Water are making promised investments to infrastructure happen.

Mr Hickey said OFWAT's fundamental duty is to ensure that customer and environment interests are met but that it was keen as a growing organisation to have evidence in advance of concerns so it could hear from the water companies how those issues could be addressed.

Chair of the Southern Water Stakeholder group Wealden Councillor Rachel Millward said, "It was once again very useful for all the local authorities across the southeast to express their concerns and raise the local issues their residents face.

"However, the disappointing reality is that OFWAT – the regulatory body for our privatised water and sewerage industry - effectively allows Southern Water to mark its own homework, with no monitoring to ensure that promised improvements are made. OFWAT issues permits with conditions of upgrades to the system, but then fails to check that those happen. OFWAT effectively waits until the system breaks down and sewage pollution is a major problem, instead of taking preventative action of checking that required works are done. This clearly isn't good enough for the national regulatory body.

"OFWAT should ensure Southern Water has a plan in place to make sure they do the upgrades and not just wait to the point of breaching the permit. We have major concerns about Southern Water's performance and the resulting sewage pollution in our rivers and seas.

"While there is a complaints system, we are unable to see exactly how a local authority would raise those complaints with OFWAT or evidence that OFWAT is doing that work. We need much greater accountability and much clearer routes to improving the situation for our residents.

“We will continue to work in partnership with other stakeholders to hold Southern Water to account.”

Following a previous meeting, the Stakeholder Group wrote to the Secretary of State for the Environment calling on more resources for the Environment Agency so it can also take action against failing water companies.

The next meeting of the Southern Water Stakeholder Group will be held in the spring.

**For further information please contact:**


Chris Bending
Director of Place
Wealden District Council
Email: chris.bending@wealden.gov.uk

Or

Annemarie Field
Senior Media and Communications officer
Wealden District Council
Tel: 07985 812076
Email: Annemarie.field@wealden.gov.uk