HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Michael Wood Dip.CSMP
Principal Inspector
Drinking Water Inspectorate
Ground Floor, Seacole Building
2 Marsham Street
London, SW1P 4DF

Reference No. HW72204 30 January 2026

Dear Michael

Thank you for your email about the recent water outages across the South East Water's supply region. Large swathes of the Maidstone parts of my constituency were severely affected, particularly those served by Headcorn such as Harrietsham and Hollingbourne, as well as areas as far afield as Boxley. Villages around Sittingbourne in Swale, including Bredgar and Milstead, were also affected.

The provision of bottled water was lacking. A water station was originally set up at Headcorn and later at Mote Park but this was still miles away from Boxley, Stockbury and other affected areas. For some of my constituents, the travel to Headcorn meant a two hour round trip, with some arriving at the water station to be told that there was no water left. Communications about water stations was poor. Some vulnerable people and those on the Priority List were provided with water while others were not. Again, communication was poor and sometimes incorrect.

I did not receive any complaints from hospitals, prisons or care homes. That said, some schools were forced to close, and even large businesses were not properly supported throughout the crisis. There is the ongoing problem of providing water to livestock during outages - both on farms with water storage and domestic customers with larger animals such as horses who are totally dependent on mains water.

The quality and quantity of South East Water's communications was abysmal. I became an intermediary, passing on as many updates as I could to Parish Councils and affected residents. My staff and I worked over the weekend to support vulnerable residents because South East Water were not fulfilling this basic job. There was no way for Parish Councils to contact South East Water directly other than via the public information lines and this needs to change.

South East Water did get back to my team and me personally most of the time. That said their briefs were very technical and they did not seem to understand the geography of my constituency or the affected area. As noted, this was also an issue in siting bottled water stations. It was hard to find out when people could expect to get their water back.

The most frustrating aspect of dealing with South East Water is that lessons do not seem to be learned and improvements made. Last July, South East Water left thousands of people in East Kent in my constituency without water for up to eight days. I raised the same concerns about the company's emergency response then and in the months following. From the recent outages nothing seems to have improved since then.

I have been calling for the Chief Executive of South East Water to be replaced to help restore public confidence and make sure the necessary improvements are made.

Parish Councils raised with me the lack of communication with them.

The South East water team had made no advance preparations to enable them to communicate with parish councillors. For instance, I urged South East water to set up water stations closer to my constituents. I appreciated that this was taken up when there was a further outage and water was distributed to Harrietsham Village Hall. However, it turned out SE Water had no out-of-hours contact details for the Parish Council and it was left to me to phone round Parish Councillors I knew to alert them of the drop-off. Fortunately, one also happened to see the pallet of bottles being unloaded. Several of those councillors then did a sterling job manning the water station and distributing water, but there was no support for them from South East water staff.

Parish Councils asked if both water companies could have one communications team during emergencies and share water stations so people can go to their nearest one regardless of who supplies their water.

They also suggested that water companies should warn local supermarkets of water shortages in advance so they can replenish their water supplies. There were reports of supermarkets also running out of bottled water.

As you regulate the Security and Emergency Measures Direction 2022, I would be very grateful if you could examine what went wrong during the recent outages and do what is necessary to make sure lessons are learned and improvements are made.

Yours sincerely



Helen Whately MP
Member of Parliament for Faversham and Mid Kent