The voice for water consumers
Llais defnyddwyr dŵr

Water Voice
Ad Hoc Accountability Session
summary report

February 2026

South East Water – Tunbridge Wells
Monday 2nd February 2026

Delivered by Taylor McKenzie
Research & Energy Saving Trust

Version: Final 12.2.26

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The ad hoc Accountability Session for South East Water revealed a **significant breakdown in trust**. This was driven by communication failures, contested explanations of the incident, and concerns about future resilience.

Q1. Breaking trust with changing communication and contradicting messages

Rebuilding trust depends on how well vulnerable and offline customers are supported in practice.

How emergency water provision is communicated and delivered directly affects trust, traffic disruption, and environmental impact.

When communication failed, trust collapsed – and the impact on community members was immediate and prolonged.

Community members sought **clear confirmation on compensation** for households and businesses affected.

Community members questioned the **lack of visible leadership and clear ownership of communication** during the incident.

Q2. They Said (Drinking Water Inspectorate) Vs You Said (what caused the outage)

Community members questioned **why official accounts of the incident differed** and sought clarity on what should have been foreseen.

Community members expected **stronger monitoring and safeguards** to prevent issues escalating undetected.

Community members looked beyond the incident itself, asking how **learning and investment would reduce future risk.**

Q3. What is the next Pembury like incident and how are you minimising risk now?

Community members asked **how future risks are being identified and prioritised** to prevent a repeat and similar incident.

Community members sought reassurance that the system is **operationally ready to respond to future failures.**

Community members wanted **clearer explanations of what went wrong and how future risks will be communicated.**

Questions asked by community members

Community members identified **three priority questions** they wanted to put directly to South East Water during the ad hoc Accountability Session. These questions reflect lived experience of the incident, concerns about how it was handled, and expectations about what needs to change in future.

Each question was led by a community member and explored in depth during the session. South East Water provided on-the-record responses, with commitments and actions discussed in real time.

The sections that follow set out each question in turn, alongside the actions discussed and the expectations community members have for delivery through the company's published action plan. This will be published on Wednesday 11th March 2026.

	Topic	Community member question
1	**Breaking trust with changing communication**	"From the outset, inconsistent and conflicting updates led customers to lose trust in the information South East Water was providing. This mistrust made it harder for people to know what was going on and what guidance to rely on about supply restoration, water delivery (particularly for vulnerable customers). The impact was felt across the wider community with significant traffic congestion caused by queues for access to the water stations. There was no consistency in what the message was or who was delivering it. What specific steps are South East Water taking to ensure that, in future outages, communications are consistent and fit-for-purpose? How will you rebuild customer trust in your companies' communications?"
2	**They Said (Drinking Water Inspectorate) Vs You Said (what caused the outage)**	"You gave a detailed account of what happened at Pembury and why it happened. We then heard a different explanation from the Drinking Water Inspector. Why do the two accounts differ and who can we believe? What learnings from the Inspectors feedback are going to be actioned?"
3	**What is the next Pembury and how are you minimising risk now?**	"What are you doing NOW to identify and prevent another Pembury-style outage - particularly in areas with a single water source or other unique vulnerabilities - given that household demand has increased since Covid, and climate change and population growth are putting even greater pressure on water supplies?"

Actions agreed during the Accountability Session

Q1. Breaking trust with changing communication

a) Review how communications are delivered to ensure messages reach vulnerable customers and those without internet access.

b) Strengthen collaboration with local authorities, including sharing and using lists to support deliveries and welfare checks for vulnerable customers

c) Improve door-knocking and welfare check approaches, particularly for elderly customers / those on Priority service register and those unable to collect water.

d) Maintain and expand use of the Priority Services Register, including delivering bottled water to the door for customers who cannot collect water.

e) Improve the way bottled water is delivered to all customers, reducing reliance on customers travelling to water stations.

f) Review the use of bottled water, including whether alternatives (such as tankering) could reduce customer travel.

g) Improve use of technology - including the app currently in beta testing - to support clearer communications and information sharing.

h) Confirm that businesses and households will receive compensation, in line with statutory payment in lieu.

i) Review who delivers messages, including visible leadership and trusted spokespeople.

j) Commission a truly independent review, with actions completed within three months and the report made visible once produced.

Q2. They Said (Drinking Water Inspectorate) Vs You Said (what caused the outage)

a) Explain clearly why South East Water's view on foreseeability differs from the Drinking Water Inspectorate's position.

b) Act on learning from the Inspectorate's feedback, including closer and more frequent monitoring of coagulants.

c) Maintain a second coagulant as an emergency back-up.

d) Install additional monitors over the next few months to improve water quality monitoring.

e) Share learning from the incident with industry experts and across the wider industry.

f) Commit to acting on any recommendations made by the Drinking Water Inspectorate.

g) Use increased investment in the five-year plan, particularly around resilience, to address future risks.

Q3. What is the next Pembury and how are you minimising risk now?

a) Commit £200m to resilience at the start of the five-year period, prioritising the most vulnerable areas.

b) Focus on areas with a single water source, making short-term operational changes informed by local teams.

c) Introduce boxed spares at selected sites to improve readiness.

d) Continue upgrading equipment and improving system connectivity to transfer water when issues arise.

e) Maximise resilience within the current system, recognising constraints in approved business plans.

f) Develop and communicate a resilience plan, explaining what has changed and what is being done now.

g) Improve communication with South East Water customers to explain resilience plans, timescales and actions taken.

h) Be transparent about why the incident happened and what has been done to fix it.

Water Voice
Ad Hoc Accountability Session summary report
February 2026

Our findings in detail

Delivered by Taylor McKenzie
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Q1. Actions
Rebuilding trust through better communication

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Q1. Breaking trust with changing communication

"From the outset, inconsistent and conflicting updates led customers to lose trust in the information South East Water was providing. This mistrust made it harder for people to know what was going on and what guidance to rely on about supply restoration, water delivery (particularly for vulnerable customers). The impact was felt across the wider community with significant traffic congestion caused by queues for access to the water stations. There was no consistency in what the message was or who was delivering it. What specific steps are South East Water taking to ensure that, in future outages, communications are consistent and fit-for-purpose? How will you rebuild customer trust in your companies' communications?"

a) Review how communications are delivered to ensure messages reach vulnerable customers and those without internet access, including people not currently on the Priority Services Register.

b) Continue and strengthen collaboration with local authorities, including sharing and using lists to support deliveries and welfare checks for vulnerable customers.

c) Explore and improve door-knocking and welfare check approaches, particularly for elderly South East Water customers / those on priority service register and those unable to collect water.

d) Maintain and expand use of the Priority Services Register, including delivering bottled water to the door for customers who cannot collect water.

e) Improve the way bottled water is delivered to all customers, reducing reliance on customers travelling to water stations.

f) Review the use of bottled water, including whether alternatives (such as trucking water in) could reduce the need for customer travel.

g) Progress use of technology, including the app currently in beta testing, to support clearer communications and information sharing.

h) Confirm that businesses and households will receive compensation, in line with statutory payment in lieu.

i) Be open to customer preferences on who delivers messages, including visible leadership and trusted spokespeople.

j) Commission a truly independent review, with actions completed within three months and the report made visible once produced.

Supporting the vulnerable and offline customers
Breaking trust with changing communication (Q 1. Actions a, b, c & d combined)

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*"From the outset, inconsistent and conflicting updates led customers to lose trust in the information South East Water was providing. **This mistrust made it harder for people to know what was going on and what guidance to rely on about supply restoration, water delivery (particularly for vulnerable customers).** The impact was felt across the wider community with significant traffic congestion caused by queues for access to the water stations. There was no consistency in what the message was or who was delivering it. What specific steps are South East Water taking to ensure that, in future outages, communications are consistent and fit-for-purpose? How will you rebuild customer trust in your companies' communications?"*

"You said" (Community member actions)	"We did" (South East Response on the night)	"We will do in the future" (South East Response on the night)	What is the 'Ideal' South East response? (In the eyes of our community)	Timescale
Digital messages don't reach everyone - especially vulnerable customers and those without internet access. Community members asked how South East Water will reach offline community members, work with local partners, and check in on elderly or vulnerable people.	• Sent **targeted communications** to their customers already identified as vulnerable, including those on the Priority Services Register. • Put arrangements in place for **nominated representatives** to act on behalf of vulnerable customers. • **Delivered bottled water to vulnerable households** and remote locations where risks were identified. • Asked customers to check on neighbours	• Work with **local authorities and community partners** to strengthen non-digital communication routes, including doorstep welfare checks where appropriate. • Expand the use of **offline support and local distribution networks** to reach customers without internet access. • Develop a more **proactive, pre-emptive approach to water deliveries** for vulnerable customers during future incidents.	Community members want clearer detail and reassurance, particularly that no one is missed, before they can accept these actions go far enough, including: • What a **proactive approach** looks like in practice (e.g. triggers, thresholds, timing). • A clear list of **offline communication methods** that will be used (e.g. door knocking, phone calls, printed notices, community hubs). • How South East Water will **strengthen and formalise partnerships** with local authorities and community organisations to ensure vulnerable customers are consistently reached.	Within the next 3 months.

Rebuilding trust depends on how well vulnerable and offline Community members are supported in practice.

"We all become vulnerable when the water supply is off for more than one day" South East community member

Emergency water provision, traffic & environmental impact

Breaking trust with changing communication (Q 1. Actions e & f combined)

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"From the outset, inconsistent and conflicting updates led Community members to lose trust in the information South East Water was providing. This mistrust made it harder for people to know what was going on and what guidance to rely on about supply restoration, **water delivery (particularly for vulnerable Community members). The impact was felt across the wider community with significant traffic congestion caused by queues for access to the water stations.** *There was no consistency in what the message was or who was delivering it. What specific steps are South East Water taking to ensure that, in future outages, communications are consistent and fit-for-purpose? How will you rebuild customer trust in your companies' communications?"*

"You said" (Community member actions)	"We did" (South East Response on the night)	"We will do in the future" (South East Response on the night)	What is the 'Ideal' South East response? (In the eyes of our community)	Timescale
Improve the way bottled water is delivered to reduce reliance on customers travelling to water stations, including concerns about traffic congestion caused by queues, and review the use of bottled water, including whether alternatives (such as trucking water in) could reduce customer travel and how recycling is handled.	Confirmed that bottled water was delivered to some vulnerable customers and remote locations during the later January incident, where risks were identified.	**No specific future commitments were set out during the session** on reducing customer travel, addressing traffic impacts, alternative delivery methods, or recycling arrangements.	Clear **justification for when bottled water is used** • **Reduced reliance** on customers **travelling** to collection point • **Minimised traffic and congestion impacts** • **Committing to deliver bottled water to everyone during a prolonged outage** • Consideration of alternatives where possible, and **transparency on environmental impacts** including the recycling of plastic bottles. • Working with local council to **recycle bottles at collection points**. • Confirmation / details on water delivery to vulnerable customers during the Nov/Dec outage	By 1st April 2026

How emergency water is communicated and delivered **directly affects trust,** traffic disruption, and environmental impact.

"It seems to me, with regards to communication, you didn't really have a strategy and you lost the room" South East community member

Digital communication and rebuilding trust

Breaking trust with changing communication (Q1 Action g)

*"From the outset, inconsistent and conflicting updates led customers to lose trust in the information South East Water was providing. This mistrust made it harder for people to know what was going on and what guidance to rely on about supply restoration, water delivery (particularly for vulnerable customers). The impact was felt across the wider community with significant traffic congestion caused by queues for access to the water stations. There was no consistency in what the message was or who was delivering it. What specific steps are South East Water taking to ensure that, in future outages, **communications are consistent and fit-for-purpose**? How will you rebuild customer trust in your companies' communications?"*

"You said" (Community Member actions)	"We did" (South East Response on the night)	"We will do in the future" (South East Response on the night)	What is the 'Ideal' South East response? (In the eyes of our community)	Timescale
Community members said that digital messages alone are not reliable during a major incident and questioned whether mass messaging actually helped people understand what was happening. They asked how technology would improve clarity, accuracy and trust and how it would work alongside non-digital communication.	South East Water stated that they had sent 1.2 million messages during the incident and referenced a customer communications app currently in beta testing.	South East Water said the app could be a useful tool for future communications	Community members want clarity on: • **how the app would work** during a live incident. Is this just for sharing information about how much bottled water is at each station or will it have other functions? • whether it would provide **accurate, consistent and trusted updates,** including social media • how South East Water would **complement offline communication** so that digital tools do not widen gaps or exclude Community members Until this is clear, community members do not yet see technology as a solution to the communication failures experienced.	Within the next 3-6 months.

When communication failed, trust collapsed – and the impact on Community members was immediate and prolonged.

"We didn't know what information we could trust"
South East community member

Compensation for households and businesses

Breaking trust with changing communication (Q 1 Action h)

"From the outset, inconsistent and conflicting updates led customers to lose trust in the information South East Water was providing. This mistrust made it harder for people to know what was going on and what guidance to rely on about supply restoration, water delivery (particularly for vulnerable customers). The impact was felt across the wider community with significant traffic congestion caused by queues for access to the water stations. There was no consistency in what the message was or who was delivering it. What specific steps are South East Water taking to ensure that, in future outages, communications are consistent and fit-for-purpose? **How will you rebuild customer trust** *in your companies' communications?"*

"You said" (Community Member actions)	"We did" (South East Response on the night)	"We will do in the future" (South East Response on the night)	What is the 'Ideal' South East response? (In the eyes of our community)	Timescale
Community members said that being without water for an extended period had a significant impact on daily life and on businesses. They asked for clear confirmation that households and businesses affected by the incident would receive compensation.	South East Water confirmed during the session that compensation* would be paid to affected households and businesses.	South East Water stated that compensation* would be paid in line with statutory payment in lieu.	Community members want: • clear information on **who will receive compensation** • clarity on **how and when payments will be made** • reassurance that customers do not need to take additional steps to receive what they are entitled to	By 1st April 2026

Compensation payments are made in line with statutory requirements. You can read more about the Guaranteed Standards Scheme (GSS) on the CCW website.
[What standards are guaranteed by water and sewerage companies? - CCW](#)

Community members sought clear confirmation on compensation for households and businesses affected.

"How are you going to A) compensate loss of water and B) resolve these complaints to, you know, build the trust effectively?" South East community member

Leadership visibility and trusted spokespeople

Breaking trust with changing communication (Q 1 Action i)

*"From the outset, inconsistent and conflicting updates led customers to lose trust in the information South East Water was providing. This mistrust made it harder for people to know what was going on and what guidance to rely on about supply restoration, water delivery (particularly for vulnerable customers). The impact was felt across the wider community with significant traffic congestion caused by queues for access to the water stations. **There was no consistency in what the message was or who was delivering it**. What specific steps are South East Water taking to ensure that, in future outages, communications are consistent and fit-for-purpose? How will you rebuild customer trust in your companies' communications?"*

"You said" (Community Member actions)	"We did" (South East Response on the night)	"We will do in the future" (South East Response on the night)	What is the 'Ideal' South East response? (In the eyes of our community)	Timescale
Community members said trust was undermined by inconsistent messaging and a lack of visible leadership. They felt that senior leaders should have been front and centre during the incident and asked who would be responsible for delivering messages in future outages.	South East Water acknowledged the concern and said they were open to hearing customer preferences on who delivers messages.	South East Water said they were open to customer views on leadership visibility and spokesperson roles. No communication solutions were explicitly described during the session.	Community members want: • Clear expectations about **when senior leadership will be publicly visible during incidents** • Consistency in **who speaks** on behalf of the company • Messages that are credible, accountable, and **delivered by people with authority** Without defined roles or commitments, community members remain concerned that this issue could recur.	Within one month.

Community members questioned the lack of visible leadership and clear ownership of communication during the incident.

""I think we expect the leader to be front and centre, to build trust" *South East community member*

Independent review and follow-through

Breaking trust with changing communication (Q 1 Action j)

"From the outset, inconsistent and conflicting updates led customers to lose trust in the information South East Water was providing. This mistrust made it harder for people to know what was going on and what guidance to rely on about supply restoration, water delivery (particularly for vulnerable customers). The impact was felt across the wider community with significant traffic congestion caused by queues for access to the water stations. There was no consistency in what the message was or who was delivering it. What specific steps are South East Water taking to ensure that, in future outages, communications are consistent and fit-for-purpose? **How will you rebuild customer trust in your companies' communications***?"*

"You said" (Community Member actions)	"We did" (South East Response on the night)	"We will do in the future" (South East Response on the night)	What is the 'Ideal' South East response? (In the eyes of our community)	Timescale
Community members said that **restoring trust requires independent scrutiny,** not an internal or company-led review. They wanted assurance that lessons would be learned, acted on, and made public.	South East Water committed to commissioning a review and stated that actions would be completed within three months, with the report made visible once produced.	South East Water said they would complete the review, act on its findings, and provide visibility of the report.	Community members want: • clarity on **who will conduct the review** and **how independence will be guaranteed** • transparency on **the scope of the review** and **how actions will be enforced** • reassurance that **findings will lead to real change,** not just recommendations Until these details are confirmed, confidence in the review process remains limited.	Within the next 3 months.

Community members called for an independent review and clear follow-through on actions.

"So why would you have a non-exec director doing that? I don't agree with that at all. I think it should be put it out to one of the big four and do it like that" South East community member

Q2. Actions
Strengthening monitoring and system oversight

Q2. They Said (Drinking Water Inspectorate) Vs You Said (what caused the outage)

"You gave a detailed account of what happened at Pembury and why it happened. We then heard a different explanation from the Drinking Water Inspector. Why do the two accounts differ and who can we believe? What learnings from the Inspectors feedback are going to be actioned?"

a) Explain clearly why South East Water's view on foreseeability differs from the Drinking Water Inspectorate's position, noting that the difference relates to foreseeability.

b) Act on learning from the Inspectorate's feedback, including closer and more frequent monitoring of coagulants.

c) Maintain a second coagulant as an emergency back-up, already put in place.

d) Install additional monitors over the next few months to improve water quality monitoring.

e) Share learning from the incident with industry experts and across the wider industry, recognising the unusual nature of the issue.

f) Commit to acting on any recommendations made by the Drinking Water Inspectorate.

g) Use increased investment in the five-year plan, particularly around resilience, to address future risks.

Conflicting explanations and foreseeability

They Said (Drinking Water Inspectorate) Vs You Said (what caused the outage) (Q2 Action a & f combined)

"You gave a detailed account of what happened at Pembury and why it happened. We then heard a different explanation from the Drinking Water Inspector.
Why do the two accounts differ and who can we believe? What learnings from the Inspectors feedback are going to be actioned?"

"You said" (Community Member actions)	"We did" (South East Response on the night)	"We will do in the future" (South East Response on the night)	What is the 'Ideal' South East response? (In the eyes of our community)	Timescale
Community members said they were confused and concerned after hearing **different explanations** from South East Water and the Drinking Water Inspectorate. They questioned **why the accounts differed**, what should have been foreseen, and **who they could trust**.	South East Water said the difference related specifically to **foreseeability**. They stated they did not believe the incident was foreseeable in the way suggested by the Drinking Water Inspectorate.	South East Water said they would **act on any recommendations** made by the Drinking Water Inspectorate.	Community members want: 1. a clear, plain-English explanation of **why views differ** 2. transparency about **what should reasonably have been anticipated** 3. confidence that regulatory feedback will be **acted on and enforced**, not disputed and set aside.	**Plain-English explanation (Point 1):** To be published within **1 month of receipt of the final DWI report.** **Transparency and regulatory action (Points 2 & 3):** To be confirmed and communicated by **1 April 2026.**

Community members questioned why official accounts of the incident differed and sought clarity on what should have been foreseen.

"Why do the two accounts differ and who can we believe?" South East community member

Monitoring, coagulants and operational controls

They Said (Drinking Water Inspectorate) Vs You Said (what caused the outage) (Q2 Action b, c & d combined)

"You gave a detailed account of what happened at Pembury and why it happened. We then heard a different explanation from the Drinking Water Inspector.
Why do the two accounts differ and who can we believe? What learnings from the Inspectors feedback are going to be actioned?"

"You said" (Community Member actions)	"We did" (South East Response on the night)	"We will do in the future" (South East Response on the night)	What is the 'Ideal' South East response? (In the eyes of our community)	Timescale
Community members said they expected **constant and proactive monitoring** of water treatment processes. They questioned how an issue of this nature was not identified sooner and asked what changes were being made to monitoring and back-up arrangements.	South East Water said: • a second coagulant had already been put in place as an emergency back-up • experts had been brought together to review the issue • monitoring was being strengthened	South East Water said they would: • install additional monitoring equipment over the coming months • monitor water quality more closely going forward.	Community members want: • reassurance that monitoring is **continuous, not periodic** • confidence that early warning signs will be identified and acted on • assurance that similar failures will be detected **before community members are affected.**	Within the next 3 months.

Community members expected stronger monitoring and safeguards to prevent issues escalating undetected.

"We would expect constant, hourly, daily monitoring of coagulants" South East community member

Learning, investment and future risk

They Said (Drinking Water Inspectorate) Vs You Said (what caused the outage) (Q2 Action e & g combined)

"You gave a detailed account of what happened at Pembury and why it happened. We then heard a different explanation from the Drinking Water Inspector.
Why do the two accounts differ and who can we believe? What learnings from the Inspectors feedback are going to be actioned?"

"You said" (Community Member actions)	"We did" (South East Response on the night)	"We will do in the future" (South East Response on the night)	What is the 'Ideal' South East response? (In the eyes of our community)	Timescale
Community members said that lessons from the incident should not sit within one company. They asked how learning would be shared more widely and how future risks would be reduced, particularly in a context of increased demand and system pressure.	South East Water said they had shared learning from the incident with industry experts, recognising the unusual nature of the issue.	South East Water said they would use increased investment in the five-year plan, particularly around resilience, to address future risks.	Community members want: • confidence that learning leads to **system-wide change** • reassurance that investment is **targeted at known vulnerabilities** • clarity on how future risks are being identified and prioritised.	Within the next 3 months.

Community members looked beyond the incident itself, asking how learning and investment would reduce future risk.

"What are you doing now to identify and prevent another Pembury-style outage?" South East Community member

Q3. Actions
What is the next Pembury and how are you minimising risk now?

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Q3. What is the next Pembury and how are you minimising risk now?

"What are you doing NOW to identify and prevent another Pembury-style outage - particularly in areas with a single water source or other unique vulnerabilities - given that household demand has increased since Covid, and climate change and population growth are putting even greater pressure on water supplies?"

a) Commit £200m to resilience at the start of the five-year period, prioritising the most vulnerable areas.
b) Focus on areas with a single water source, learning from operational teams and making short-term changes.
c) Introduce boxed spares at sites in two to three areas to improve readiness.
d) Continue upgrading equipment and working with asset management to transfer more water into the system when issues arise.
e) Maximise resilience within the current system, recognising where business plan approvals were not granted.
f) Develop and communicate a resilience plan, explaining what has changed and what is being done now to improve the outlook.
g) Improve communication with South East Water customers, including use of social media and local outreach, to explain plans, timescales, and rebuild trust.
h) Be transparent about why the incident happened and what has been done to fix it, responding to customer appetite for clarity.

Identifying and prioritising future risk

What is the next Pembury and how are you minimising risk now? (Q3 Action a & b combined)

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"What are you doing NOW to identify and prevent another Pembury-style outage - particularly in areas with a single water source or other unique vulnerabilities - given that household demand has increased since Covid, and climate change and population growth are putting even greater pressure on water supplies?"

"You said" (Community Member actions)	"We did" (South East Response on the night)	"We will do in the future" (South East Response on the night)	What is the 'Ideal' South East response? (In the eyes of our community)	Timescale
Community members asked what South East Water is doing **now** to identify and prevent another Pembury-style outage, particularly in areas with a **single water source or unique vulnerabilities**. They wanted reassurance that risks are being actively identified and prioritised, not just planned for in the long term.	South East Water said they had committed **£200m to resilience at the start of the five-year period**, prioritising areas that are most vulnerable.	South East Water said they would focus investment on areas with a single water source and make **short-term operational changes**, informed by learning from operational teams.	Community members want: • clarity on **which sites are considered most at risk** • reassurance that risks are being identified **before failures occur** • confidence that action is being taken **now**, not only through long-term investment plans.	Within the next 3 months.

Community members asked how future risks are being identified and prioritised to prevent a repeat incident.

"What is the next Pembury and how are you minimising risk now?" South East community member

Operational readiness and system resilience

What is the next Pembury and how are you minimising risk now? (Q3 Action c, d & e combined)

*"What are you doing NOW to identify and **prevent another Pembury-style outage** - particularly in areas with a single water source or other unique vulnerabilities - given that household demand has increased since Covid, and climate change and population growth are putting even greater pressure on water supplies?"*

"You said" (Community Member actions)	"We did" (South East Response on the night)	"We will do in the future" (South East Response on the night)	What is the 'Ideal' South East response? (In the eyes of our community)	Timescale
Community members questioned how prepared the system is to respond to failures when they occur. They asked what changes were being made to improve **operational readiness**, equipment resilience, and the ability to move water through the system during incidents.	South East Water said they had been working to improve system resilience, including upgrading equipment and working with asset management to transfer more water when issues arise.	South East Water said they would: • introduce **boxed spares** at selected sites to improve readiness • **continue upgrading equipment** and maximising resilience within the current system, recognising limits in approved business plans.	Community members want: • assurance that sites are **ready to respond quickly** when problems occur • evidence that operational learning has led to **practical, on-the-ground changes.** • **Risk assessment** updated and shared	Within the next 3 months.

Community members sought reassurance that the system is operationally ready to respond to future failures.

"You have a risk map, don't you?" South East community member

Transparency, communication and rebuilding confidence

What is the next Pembury and how are you minimising risk now? (Q3 Action f, g & h combined)

*"What are you doing NOW to **identify and prevent another Pembury-style outage** - particularly in areas with a single water source or other unique vulnerabilities - given that household demand has increased since Covid, and climate change and population growth are putting even greater pressure on water supplies?"*

"You said" (Community Member actions)	"We did" (South East Response on the night)	"We will do in the future" (South East Response on the night)	What is the 'Ideal' South East response? (In the eyes of our community)	Timescale
Community members said there is a strong appetite for transparency. They wanted to understand **why the incident happened**, what has been done to fix it, and how future risks will be communicated clearly to Community members.	South East Water acknowledged the need to explain what happened and **recognised the importance of rebuilding trust** through better communication.	South East Water said they would: • **communicate their resilience plan and make this accessible to customers** • **improve communication** with customers, including greater use of social media and local outreach • be **more transparent** about what has changed and **what is being done to improve in the future.**	Community members want: • a **clear, customer-facing resilience plan** • **honest explanations**, delivered in plain language • proactive **communication that builds confidence**, rather than reacting after problems occur. • Social media should be used to greater effect, to communicate what the company is doing in terms of resilience.	Within the next 3- 6 months.

Community members wanted clearer explanations of what went wrong and how future risks will be communicated.

"Why has this happened and what has been done to fix it?" South East Community member

What happens after the accountability session?
After the face-to-face accountability session, there is a clear and structured follow-up process.

Publication and transparency
Within 5 working days
A full (anonymised) transcript of the session was published on
Monday 9th February

Within 10 working days
A plain-English summary is published, setting out:
The questions asked.
The key points raised by Community members.
The actions agreed for inclusion in the action plan.
Anything recorded as *not yet agreed*.
(Monday 16th February)

Action plan
Within 28 days
The water company must share its **action plan**, setting out how it will deliver the agreed actions.
The action plan will be **shared with the Water Voice community on**
Wednesday 11th March

Customer feedback
Participants will be asked, via a short survey, whether they feel the action plan:

✓ Reflects what was agreed in the session
✓ Goes far enough to address customer concerns

This feedback forms part of CCW's ongoing monitoring and follow-up with the company and helps inform future accountability work.

The voice for water consumers
Llais defnyddwyr dŵr

Water Voice
Ad Hoc Accountability Session
summary report

February 2026

Annex: Research approach

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Research & Energy Saving Trust

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Background
Why was this ad hoc session arranged?

This ad hoc Accountability Session was triggered by the Pembury Water Treatment Works outage and subsequent boil water notice affecting Tunbridge Wells in November-December 2025, which raised significant concerns about service resilience, transparency, and customer communication.

The incident resulted in:

- Up to five days with no water supply for some community members and nine days under a boil water notice.
- Around 24,000 customers of South East Water affected, including schools, healthcare settings, and community facilities.
- Large-scale emergency response measures, including bottled water stations, tankering, and Priority Services Register (PSR) deliveries.

While the technical root cause related to turbidity failures at the final stage of treatment at Pembury Water Treatment Works, the incident exposed wider systemic and customer-facing issues that go beyond a single operational failure.

Key factors that prompted escalation to an ad hoc accountability session include:

- Repeatedly changing and inaccurate restoration time estimates, with the company revising expected restoration on at least six occasions, undermining customer confidence.

- Poor transparency in public communications, including early explanations that later proved incorrect and limited clarity about what was actually causing the problem.

- Limited senior leadership visibility, with the Chief Executive not appearing publicly until well after the incident had been resolved.

- Strong political and regulatory concern, including intervention from the local MP and scrutiny by the EFRA Committee, with questions raised about preparedness, candour, and governance.

- Findings from the Drinking Water Inspectorate, presented to Parliament, which suggested the incident should not have been a surprise and highlighted historic issues around asset condition, monitoring, risk management, and emergency preparedness.

Objectives
What the ad hoc session aims to achieve

The session is designed to deliver **clear consumer-led accountability and tangible outcomes**, with the following objectives:

- **Give community members a direct voice** – enabling them to share lived experience, challenge performance, and ask the questions that matter most to them.

- **Secure substantive, on-the-record responses** from senior water company representatives to issues raised.

- **Test the adequacy of company responses in real time**, using facilitated discussion and live feedback to assess whether answers are clear, credible, and satisfactory from a consumer perspective.

- Agree the actions and expectations that must be reflected in a time-bound company action plan.

- **Strengthen trust and transparency** by demonstrating how consumer insight leads directly to accountability and action.

Outputs

By the close of the process, this ad hoc Accountability Session will have:

- Provided CCW with **robust, publishable evidence** of consumer concerns and company responses.

- Established a clear and transparent set of customer-agreed actions that the water company must reflect in its published action plan. The action plan itself is published by the company following the session, in line with the accountability process.

- Given consumers confidence that their participation leads to **real scrutiny and follow-through**, reinforcing the credibility of the accountability process.

- Informed future regulatory engagement by highlighting **systemic or recurring issues** requiring wider attention.

Together, this ensures the session delivers both **immediate accountability** and **longer-term value** for consumers and the sector.

Methodology
How the accountability process was delivered.

The ad hoc Accountability Session followed CCW's accountability framework, adapted to allow a rapid, consumer-led response to an emerging incident.

Participants were prepared in advance using clear, plain-English briefing materials, setting out the session format, topics for discussion and how their contributions would be used.

The session was delivered as a professionally facilitated discussion, designed to ensure balanced participation and allow community members to question senior water company representatives directly.

Facilitation focused on testing responses in real time, probing clarity, credibility and completeness from a consumer perspective.

Observers attended in a non-participatory capacity to support transparency, while the discussion itself remained customer-led.

The session was recorded and transcribed, with all reporting anonymised.

Findings are published alongside a requirement for the company to produce a time-bound action plan, with follow-up feedback gathered from participants and the wider community.

Sample
Which community members have been selected to take part?

The South East Water consumer panel is made up of **50 community members**, recruited to reflect the **full South East Water supply area**, ensuring a spread of locations and a diversity of regional perspectives.

For this **ad hoc Accountability Session**, the focus was intentionally narrowed to those **closest to the incident location**, to ensure the discussion was grounded in direct and relevant local experience. From the wider panel of 50, **12 community members living in or near Tunbridge Wells** were invited to take part, reflecting proximity to the outage and its impacts.

Of those invited, **7 community members were available and chose to participate** in the session. While the intention was to prioritise participation from those **most directly affected by the incident**, attendance ultimately reflected **availability within the existing community panel** at the time of the session.

The panel is designed to represent the wider supply area rather than any single locality, and participation in ad hoc sessions is voluntary.

As a result, the final group reflects a balance between those with **direct lived experience** of the outage and those with **strong local connections or wider concern** about how the incident was handled.

The final selection included:
- Community members **directly affected** by the outage and boil water notice
- Community members with **close family members or neighbours affected**, offering insight into wider household and community impacts
- Community members who were **not directly impacted**, but who raised concerns about resilience, communication, and future risk

While not statistically representative, the sample was **purposefully selected** to prioritise depth of lived experience, informed challenge, and meaningful dialogue, while remaining grounded in the broader regional context provided by the full panel and enabling timely accountability.

Thank you!

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