**Water regulator agrees to partnership working following criticisms in relation to Southern Water**

The watchdog responsible for regulating the water and sewerage industry, Ofwat, 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 — pledged to better partnership working with local authorities at a meeting organised by the Southern Water Stakeholder Group on 19 January 2024.

The Southern Water Stakeholder group was set up to put pressure on Southern Water — which is responsible for wastewater across the region and for drinking water in other parts of the southeast — in light of pollution and flooding concerns.

Ofwat’s pledge follows criticisms by councils that the watchdog has not been effective in holding Southern Water to account.

During the meeting, which was attended by Southern Water, council officials said responses from the organisation have been continuously slow and unacceptable and the company failed to deliver promised upgrades. They asked Ofwat what local authorities could do to expedite complaints about Southern Water and how Ofwat carried out compliance checks against the company.

There were also criticisms that Ofwat is not monitoring Southern Water closely enough or ensuring that the water company is working efficiently. Council representatives explained that a much clearer understanding was needed of how councils can work with Ofwat to resolve problems and called on the water regulator to proactively help local authorities. They also asked for reassurance from Ofwat that water companies, such as Southern Water, are delivering on their promises to invest in infrastructure improvements.

Chichester District Council’s Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for the Environment, Cllr Jonathan Brown, and Cabinet Member for Planning, Cllr Bill Brisbane, also attended the meeting.

“Chichester District Council is one of 24 councils across the south east that have joined together to hold Southern Water to account over pollution and infrastructure failings,” says Cllr Brisbane.

“We have been challenging Southern Water in relation to their engagement with both the planning process and the environmental impacts of discharging sewage into Chichester Harbour for some time. This includes previously filing an official complaint about the company to the Ofwat.

“By joining forces with other local councils, we have been able to apply significant pressure on Southern Water. The Southern Water Stakeholder Group was set up in response to issues including flooding; sewage backing up into people’s homes, gardens and roads; the ongoing problem of discharges into rivers and waterways; and the inability to deal with additional development.

“These include the recent flooding and associated drain surcharging; sewage and subsequent discharges into the harbour and water courses affecting the water quality of Chichester Harbour; delays in upgrades to the sewerage network; and slow responses to planning applications.”

Cllr Brown adds: “Unfortunately, as a district council, we do not have the direct power to regulate Southern Water or require it to address its failings. But as local authorities working together, we can do more to apply pressure and seek the required action needed to resolve these issues. Our residents deserve better and we will continue to work in partnership with other stakeholders to hold Southern Water to account.

“We are also involved in a Three Harbours Summit, which involves Southern Water and representatives from the council and other local authorities, along with relevant agencies such as Natural England, the Environment Agency, Chichester Harbour Conservancy, Langstone Harbour Board and Sussex Wildlife Trust. This is a positive step towards working together to help improve the harbour for future years to come. The aim is that this group will have a positive impact on Southern Water’s five-year investment plan.”

In the meeting on 19 January, Ofwat’s representative explained that the body’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 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.”

Councils have called for greater accountability and much clearer routes to improving the situation for residents. The next meeting of the Southern Water Stakeholder Group will be held in the spring.

**ENDS**

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