

Mike Martin MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee  
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**18 December 2025**

Dear Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee,

**Re: Tunbridge Wells Water Outage, December 2025**

This letter provides evidence of catastrophic failings by South East Water during the December 2025 water outage in Tunbridge Wells. It is eyewitness testimony from someone who was at the centre of the crisis and who witnessed the failings of the water company from multiple angles and over multiple days. I submit it to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (EFRA) Committee for their hearing on 6<sup>th</sup> January 2026 for the Reforming the Water Sector inquiry.

I would like to begin by praising and thanking the officers at Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, the Chief Executive of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, the officers at Kent County Council on the Kent Resilience Forum, officials at DEFRA including the Drinking Water Inspectorate, my Parliamentary Office team, and the Minister for Water Emma Hardy MP. I would also like to praise the South East Water teams who endeavoured to man the bottle sites, despite the cold December rain and often for 12 hours at a time.

All worked extremely hard under great pressure to ameliorate what was a terrible situation caused and exacerbated by South East Water.

**Executive Summary**

Twenty-four thousand properties in Tunbridge Wells were without drinking water over a 13-day period at the beginning of December. At least fifteen thousand of these properties had no water supply at all for five days and many more experienced long outages. This was followed by an 8 to 10-day period of non-potable supply.

This incident was significantly exacerbated by the total lack of a crisis response plan from South East Water (SEW). As someone who spoke to leaders, managers and staff in separate teams of SEW throughout the period, it was clear that internal coordination and communication quickly fell apart from the beginning of the crisis. Different teams in the organisation did not know what other teams

were doing. Water bottle distribution was sub-contracted to a third party contributing to the poor response as information they provided was at times clearly incorrect and therefore unreliable.

The crisis was then further exacerbated by overoptimistic, disjointed, contradictory and poorly worded public communications from SEW. The company failed to appoint a dedicated spokesperson during the crisis, and the CEO refused to give interviews at all, despite multiple national media requests. The woeful communication from SEW was responsible for a breakdown of trust in the community and completely undermined the reliability and integrity of official information. This created an information vacuum online and on social media, often filled by unhelpful rumours and speculation from concerned citizens, which was exploited by external and malicious actors, who intentionally spread disinformation.

This water crisis significantly affected thousands of pupils in Tunbridge Wells, who were unable to attend school at short notice, and their parents; hundreds of businesses with thousands or tens of thousands of pounds worth of losses; GPs, care homes and other medical settings, putting thousands of vulnerable people put at risk.

In the runup to Christmas 2022, an almost identical outage affected thousands of households and businesses across Tunbridge Wells for six days. There have also been multiple smaller outages since, including some in the last month. After the crisis in 2022, SEW's CEO David Hinton promised that his company had learnt lessons regarding its network resilience, crisis management and communications. These promises were not kept and it's clear that no lessons have been learned.

### **Timeline of Events**

Sat 29 Nov: Water supply ceases for thousands of households in Tunbridge Wells (TW) overnight (Saturday to Sunday). A smaller number of houses in TW lose pressure/supply during the day. No bottle stations are set up in Tunbridge Wells.

Sun 30 Nov: TW Member of Parliament (MP) phone call with SEW CEO at 0630; three bottle stations are set up during the day; SEW make multiple announcements about when the water supply will return which turnout to be false. TW is gridlocked with 90-minute queues to get to bottle stations. Hundreds of vulnerable people on priority register do not receive deliveries until Tuesday. MP's office acts as clearing house for vulnerable person requests as people are unable to contact SEW. All hospitality businesses are forced to close.

Mon 1 Dec: SEW continue to make announcements about when the water supply will return to affected households which turn out to be false. Most schools and nurseries remain closed in Tunbridge Wells. GPs or care homes do not receive water deliveries – staff must instead go to bottle stations to collect water in bulk, putting patient care at risk. I called for David Hinton, CEO of SEW, to resign for a failure of leadership, having not learnt the lessons of the previous week-long outage in 2022. Hinton calls me that evening at home and speaks to me in an extremely unprofessional manner.<sup>1</sup>

Tue 2 Dec: Minister for Water is briefed on the ongoing crisis – she pushes SEW to prioritise GPs and care homes with water deliveries. MP's Office provides SEW with list of affected GPs as SEW does not

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<sup>1</sup> Hinton noted that I was putting my young children to bed at the time and asked me how I could sleep at night having "politicised the issue". Hinton was also later heard in the background of other calls between SEW and local government officials during the crisis mockingly asking 'What do they want now? I bet they want me to resign'.

hold such a list. A small number of houses have supply returned, only for it to be lost again. Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (TWBC) sets up mobile toilets in the main town square (Five Ways), despite repeatedly asking SEW to provide them.

Wed 3 Dec: TW water crisis mentioned at PMQs and leads the news in the UK. Boil water notice issued – water begins to return over the following 24-30 hours but must be boiled before consumption. SEW releases unclear and conflicting communication about what the boil notice means, or even which areas it applies to. This information leads to six schools closing even though they didn't need to, contributing to significant anxiety in parents of children who attend schools that remain open. Strategic Response Group meetings chaired by the Minister for Water begin with DEFRA, DWI, KCC, TWBC, SEW & MP – every meeting participant pushed SEW to clarify their communications around the boil notice. Significant disinformation begins to circulate online about the safety of tap water in TW.

Thu 4 Dec: Most properties have their supply returned by around 1800 (with boiling). It becomes clear that hundreds of businesses have lost thousands or tens of thousands of pounds due to the water outage. Minister for Water, MP and TWBC urge SEW to compensate businesses well above the statutory minimum. DEFRA and Cabinet Office convene team to tackle online disinformation which starts to spread amongst community. Schools and nurseries finally receive bottled water deliveries.

Fri 5 Dec: Some schools and nurseries open. Many hospitality businesses remain closed; bookings for those that are open are significantly down due to reduced confidence in the safety of the water (a direct result of the poor communications by SEW).

Sat 6 Dec: Last property has its supply returned (with boiling).

Mon 8 Dec: All schools and nurseries open. Further Strategic Response Group meetings are held where SEW are urged to compensate businesses properly.

Tue 9 Dec: EFRA Select Committee invite David Hinton, CEO SEW, to give evidence on Jan 6 2026.

Fri 12 Dec: Boil notice is lifted with poor communications from SEW (nurseries and schools are told first who then email parents – so information seeps by rumour into community rather than from one authoritative announcement from SEW). Once the boil notice is lifted, people are still asking whether the water can be trusted. This means hospitality bookings and footfall remain down.

### **Crisis Management**

There was a total lack of a crisis plan. SEW didn't know where to set up bottle stations and had to have the locations suggested to them. They didn't have lists of GPs, schools nor care homes. Their system for deliveries to vulnerable people broke down. The hospital received tankers of water, but the dialysis centre had to shut meaning kidney dialysis patients—some in critical condition—had to travel to London to receive dialysis.

Through several days of interacting with different parts of SEW, it was clear to me that the different functions of the company didn't know what other functions were doing (see also disjointed communications – below). This became clear to me when I heard later on that the CEO spent most of the crisis at Pembury Treatment Works (he said this himself in a Ministerial meeting) – one assumes trying to solve the water chemistry crisis, rather than trying to lead the overall response (crisis management, comms, etc.).

Through my interactions with David Hinton (at first one to one, and then later through the ministerial meetings), it was evident that he viewed the crisis as one of water chemistry and that was where he felt comfortable (all his briefs to the meetings would be mostly about this). This is not surprising when one considers that he started his career in the water industry in the laboratory—naturally people head to where they are comfortable when put under extreme pressure. His focus on the chemistry meant he failed to lead the crisis management and communications and often didn't have all the facts to hand.<sup>2</sup>

### Bottle stations.

When I spoke to the CEO at 0630 on Sun 30<sup>th</sup> Nov, I said that the bottle station set up the day before in Tonbridge (a separate town, without a water shortage) was totally unacceptable and pushed him to set up multiple sites in Tunbridge Wells ASAP. He said they would set one up at the Pembury Tesco (where there was a site at the last major outage). I pointed out that it was a poor site (at the end of a long main access road into town prone to traffic jams) and in any case we needed multiple sites (the previous MP Greg Clark had also told SEW not to use Pembury Tesco again as it was an unsuitable site). It transpired that they didn't know of any other sites, and so I suggested several including the St John's Leisure Centre, where the first site was set up. Because this was the only site, it became quickly gridlocked, such that the police had to be called to do traffic control. The police and I then suggested the Knight's Park location, where the third bottle station was set up.

I find it beyond belief that they did not have previously scoped and agreed sites, especially considering that the water regularly fails in Tunbridge Wells. Even with three sites, it was difficult to get water if you didn't have a car and so the Borough Council offered their town centre location for a walk-in site.

It took several days for the sites to have a sufficient continued delivery of water to them – in the first two days some sites had to close when they ran out of water (with thousands of people still in the queue). The fulfilment logistics were operated remotely meaning SEW didn't have accurate information on stock levels with which to direct restocking by the sub-contractor. SEW provided no online updates as to water stocks – local councillors went to each site and passed back reports on stocks which I communicated to the public. At one point, the SEW teams abandoned the Knights Park site leaving water there which was looted, leaving rubbish strewn all over the site.

The entire bottle station delivery operation was run by a contractor who were giving incorrect reports to SEW – I would be on the phone to the SEW ops team while standing at a bottle station who would tell me a lorry had arrived at the site, when I could see with my own eyes that this wasn't the case. SEW simply did not have a picture of what was happening on the ground.

### Deliveries to vulnerable people.

South East Water maintains a priority services register (PSR) of vulnerable people who are unable to get to a bottle site to pick up water. There was a significant difference between the number of

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<sup>2</sup> During the crisis, a prominent journalist told me he had been interviewing South East Water personnel at a bottled water site and had asked them whether they thought David Hinton should resign. "No, we'd just like him to do his job" was the response.

properties SEW appeared to have on their PSR register and the number of PSR deliveries they eventually needed to make. As with previous outages, this also failed to meet the needs of those who are temporarily in need of the PSR support, and included many people who no longer needed the PSR support as their temporary need dated to a previous water outage.

Among personal situations I am aware of were cancer patients, parents with newborns and many sick with the flu virus. Many turned to me and my Office when they were unable to get through to the SEW telephone line to receive a water delivery. The MP's Office in the end acted as a clearing house and sent over 160 vulnerable person delivery requests directly to the SEW response team. In some of the worst cases, vulnerable people went without water deliveries for several days before having to seek the help of neighbours.<sup>3</sup>

See also section on vulnerable people, below.

### Schools / nurseries.

Twenty-two schools closed during the crisis, leaving thousands of pupils at home. This had a knock-on impact on parents of younger children who then also had to stay at home. Many nurseries also closed. The imposition of the boil notice, without clarity of the affected area by SEW, caused six schools to close that didn't need to close, and caused significant friction between teachers and parents at other schools who understandably were trying to interpret the conflicting advice from SEW (see section Communications/Boil Notice below). It was only upon receiving Ministerial insistence that SEW issued communications to each school saying whether they were in or out of the area affected by the boil notice.

SEW didn't have a list of schools in the area – KCC had to provide the list of state schools, and we added on several independent schools that they were not aware of.

SEW didn't have a list of nurseries – my office provided that to them – and some only got water deliveries on Sat 6 Dec.

### GPs / Care Homes / Other Medical Settings.

GPs were completely missed from SEW water deliveries, and they had to source their own water. It became clear that SEW didn't have a list of the GPs until my Office sent them one.

Some care homes received no deliveries at all. One care home told SEW on Sunday that they needed bottled water deliveries, and they were still picking them up themselves in a van from a bottle station on Tuesday afternoon, having received nothing from SEW.

The town's kidney dialysis unit had to shut down for several days leaving the patients—some in critical condition—to travel to London to receive dialysis. The previous MP Greg Clark outlined the issues with the dialysis centre to SEW, and this lesson clearly wasn't picked up, along with many others.

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<sup>3</sup> A week after the crisis South East Water said to a fellow MP, whose constituency is supplied by SEW, that "everyone on the Priority Services Register in Tunbridge Wells did get water ... some took 24 hours, but everyone on the PSR got a delivery". 1) This is categorically untrue; 2) SEW should report accurately to elected representatives; 3) SEW should be asked in committee to repeat that statement on the record.

## **Communications**

The public communications from SEW during the crisis were either overoptimistic, absent and changed repeatedly at short notice; incorrect and contradictory; unclear and poorly worded; or in at least one case, dangerous to infant human health. An interagency communications group was set up to try and help improve SEW's communications – and SEW sent a junior employee who wasn't empowered to make decisions, thus frustrating the process. SEW simply did not prioritise communications and failed to put up a consistent spokesperson during the crisis. The CEO did not give a single media interview or statement during the crisis.

These failings by SEW meant that an online information vacuum opened which was filled with incorrect speculation and, later, bad actors spreading disinformation, which required an intervention from the Cabinet Office.

### Timelines for resolution.

From Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> November until Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> December, SEW repeatedly issued statements that the water would be coming back on very shortly – e.g. this evening, or tomorrow morning, etc. On Tuesday 2<sup>nd</sup> December, SEW issued a communication at 0820AM saying that the water supply issues would be resolved by 0800AM (... twenty minutes earlier). After several of these missed deadlines, the company stopped communicating about resolution for about 24 hours and then issued the boil notice.

The damage that this did to public trust was immense as it frustrated people's ability to plan – an especially acute problem if you ran a hospitality business with fresh stock or are a vulnerable person that needs water. This initial failure to communicate accurately laid the foundations for the huge issues that occurred when the boil notice was issued (see later).

### Language used by SEW.

SEW repeatedly used language that exacerbated the lack of trust that people had in the company and the water supply. For instance, that the initial crisis was caused by a 'bad batch of chemicals' – something that a responsible company would not say in relation to water supply. When the boil notice was issued it mentioned 'contaminated water' (without saying what with). At other times abstract phrases were used like 'water quality issues' (again without specifying what the issues were). Generally speaking, the water status updates on their websites were written in vague abstract 'corporate' language, which meant that speculation ran wild on social media.

### Boil Notice (Wed 3 Dec to Friday 12 December).

The SEW boil notice (BN) communications stated contradictory information at the same time. For example:

- The BN stated that if a property had lost pressure or supply during the crisis and had then had supply returned on the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> December then they should boil water for drinking/cooking etc. (stipulation 1). Slightly further down the page, it gave a list of postcodes affected (stipulation 2). Initially these were big areas e.g. TN1, TN2, etc. Then slightly smaller areas e.g. TN1 2, TN2 4, etc. Then, upon Ministerial insistence, full

postcodes were given. The postcodes (stipulation 2) never fully matched the affected area as given in stipulation 1 (especially when only top-level postcodes e.g. TN1 were given). There was also a shaded map on the website (stipulation 3) which matched neither of the other two stipulations about the BN. This caused real anxiety amongst the public as SEW were giving out contradictory information at the same time, on the same page.

- At one point, an unaffected postcode in Hadlow was included causing panic there.
- This disconnect meant that six schools had to close (because they came on the postcode list) even though they didn't need to (because they are not supplied by Pembury Water Treatment Works).
- A restaurant was included in the postcode list even though it wasn't affected by the outage thus causing a huge loss of business for absolutely no reason other than SEW's incompetent communications.
- At one point we realised that the SEW website, the social media team, and the call centre were giving out slightly different information about handwashing, dishwashing etc. (By this point SEW was not functioning as a cohesive organisation, and more like a collection of separate organisations). The Borough Council and I had to, on multiple occasions, point out these inconsistencies and get SEW to straighten them out. SEW's poor communications were a continuous theme in the Ministerial meetings.
- There were frequent discrepancies on the same website about when it is safe to use un-boiled water, boiled water or bottled water. The worst instance of this—luckily spotted late one night by a member of my team—were differing descriptions of how to prepare baby formula milk. I rang up the SEW ops team who fixed this immediately.

The lifting of the BN was also clouded in confusion. SEW were meant to ring key organisations like nurseries and schools before the BN was lifted to give them technical information about how to proceed when this happened. Crucially, they were not to say that it would be lifted at any particular time. Instead, they told these settings that it would be lifted that afternoon. Some of those settings then emailed parents, which meant that the information of the BN lifting spread partly by rumour rather than an authoritative statement from SEW backed up by KCC/TWBC/MP (as had been discussed at the previous Ministerial meeting). Furthermore, the media were briefed by SEW, confirming that the boil notice would be lifted, well before confirming that information to my Office or other stakeholders.

#### Spokespeople and representation at comms forums.

SEW failed to put up one consistent spokesperson during the crisis and instead put up different executives. Each failed to inspire confidence in their media engagements. The CEO refused to make a statement or give an interview despite multiple media requests. As far as I am aware, a spokesperson was not put up for media interviews until the 4<sup>th</sup> December (6 days into the crisis, 1 day after the boil notice and 2 days after the major incident was declared).

SEW communications were so poor that an interagency comms forum was set up at a local level to work through the comms issues with them. They only sent a junior employee, who was not empowered to make decisions and had to take everything back to SEW for actioning. In a fast-moving public health crisis this significantly slowed down their response. The CEO wasn't aware of this when it was raised it with him in the Ministerial meetings.

## Disinformation

The total lack of trust in SEW and their communications meant that the vacuum was filled by speculation from the public around what the water was safe to use for (e.g. bathing in water that hadn't been boiled). This was further exploited by bad actors spreading disinformation (e.g. skin burning after showering with water from taps; local hospitals full of people with upset stomachs). Parents of young children were particularly alarmed by the lack of reliable information to help them to make sensible and informed decisions about the cause of common childhood skin irritations and upset tummies, etc. This disinformation became the subject of cross government work between DEFRA and the Cabinet Office at my request.

## **Impact of the crisis on vulnerable people**

The lack of water in Tunbridge Wells alongside the accompanying appalling crisis management had a profound impact on vulnerable people in the constituency, many of whom did not get water deliveries for many days. Here are a small number of anonymised examples:

- A woman with serious mental health issues at a water bottle station in a state of extreme distress who repeatedly forgot why she had visited the bottle station, and tried to leave without water.
- Mothers with young children who couldn't drive and were therefore unable to get water from the bottle stations (and unable to plan due to SEW's repeated incorrect announcements that the water would be coming back on shortly).
- Social media exchanges speculating about the causes of children's (common) mild symptoms (e.g. skin irritations, nausea etc.) causing extreme anxiety with parents.
- A woman falling ill after only receiving two hours dialysis rather than the required four hours.
- Another dialysis patient having to receive a life-saving medical intervention due to them being unable to receive dialysis.
- A man being unable to self-catheterise (with the risk of his bladder rupturing) until I personally dropped a six pack of water to him.
- A bowel cancer patient, incontinent, left without water for days and unable to keep herself or her clothes clean. Water was delivered on the 4<sup>th</sup> day.
- A woman suffering a miscarriage unable to wash after heavy miscarriage bleeding for 36 hours. The couple would have relocated had they not been constantly told that the water was just about to come back on.

## **Losses to businesses in Tunbridge Wells**

- I ran a survey of businesses in Tunbridge Wells and had 108 responses.
- The average loss of earnings was approximately £8,000 per business, but for some hotels and restaurants this rose to £30,000 or even more.
- A nursery (run as a charity) lost £16,000 which is the cost of two free places for a disadvantaged child to attend for a year.
- The loss of supply and the boil notice caused a major collapse in confidence in the town centre with footfall down by 50%, and thousands of bookings being cancelled.

- Nine businesses reported a loss of more than 5% of annual earnings (majority hospitality businesses).
- 32% of business who responded told us that their survival was threatened by cash flow issues (again majority hospitality businesses).
- SEW refused to supply bottled water to businesses so they had to buy their own.

I understand several businesses are also preparing submissions and so I will not repeat their evidence here.

The Minister for Water, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, the Business Improvement District and the MP for Tunbridge Wells have been consistent that SEW must compensate businesses at a level well above the statutory minimum.

The SEW offer of just £600,000 (to cover the 1,500 or so businesses in TW, so £400 per business – or approx. the takings from one small office Christmas lunch) is risible and insulting (because it accepts the principle of paying more than the statutory minimum, but in no way meets the scale of the loss with the amount offered).

### **Committee Submission**

I submit the proceeding evidence to the EFRA Committee for their consideration and would be pleased to answer any further questions that the Committee may have. I am happy for this evidence to be published by the Committee.

Yours sincerely,



Mike Martin MP  
Member of Parliament for Tunbridge Wells