

Benenden Residents Meeting

South East Water — Monday 7 September 2026, Benenden Girls' School

A note on this document: the source recording was auto-transcribed and the resulting text was often not clear (technical terms, place names and figures are frequently misheard). What follows is a paraphrased, best-effort reconstruction, not a verbatim transcript. Facts, figures and place names have been cross-checked against the South East Water slide deck wherever the transcript clearly refers to the same point, and are reliable where marked. Nothing in quotation marks below should be treated as an exact quote unless stated.

1. Introduction — Lucy & Athena, Benenden Water Action Group

Lucy opened the meeting on behalf of the Benenden Water Action Group, the resident-led group formed in response to repeated water outages and low-pressure incidents across May, June, July and August 2026. She thanked Benenden Girls' School for hosting, South East Water's on-the-ground engineers for the recent repair work, the press for the coverage that helped raise the issue, and the volunteers who set up and ran the action group by name, including Amanda Garratt and a number of other residents: Peter, Susie, Nicky, Nicci, Helen, Sarah and Athena, plus Benenden Cricket Club.

Athena acknowledged the anger, stress and disruption residents had experienced over recent years, particularly the most recent outages, and noted that supply had only recently been restored with normal pressure. She was clear that the group's aim was not simply to hear an apology but to prevent a repeat, and that impact statements gathered from residents (personal and business) had been shared with South East Water and had informed today's meeting.

She set out that the action group had asked South East Water for four things this evening:

- An explanation of the local water supply network and why it fails — covered by Doug Whitfield's short video and network overview.
- A more effective way of dealing with South East Water's contact centre, which many residents found frustrating.
- A short-term plan for the immediate area, to give confidence ahead of summer 2027.
- A long-term plan for supply in the region as new housing is built, linked to the company's investment plan to 2030, funded by customer bills.

She confirmed a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document — reviewed in draft by South East Water before being finalised and circulated — was available at the meeting. Any questions not covered tonight would be carried forward to a further, follow-up meeting on 24 September, to be chaired by the parish council and attended by South East Water. She then handed over to South East Water for roughly 20–25 minutes of presentation, ahead of table discussions and open Q&A.

2. Presentation — key points by speaker

John Halsall — Chief Executive Officer

John Halsall introduced himself as newly appointed CEO (around six weeks into the role at the time of the meeting), with a career background as a civil engineer, having previously worked across other water companies and the rail industry before joining South East Water. He opened by acknowledging how upsetting and unacceptable the outages had been for residents, and for staff, and said the business is determined to put things right. He referenced ongoing engagement with the community since the August outage, including site visits, and set the tone that the company was there "to listen, to share, and to tell you what we can do in the future." He acknowledged that some of the underlying issues are long-standing and won't be fixed overnight, but that concrete short-term actions would follow before next summer, alongside the medium and long-term investment plans.

Jenny Rhodes — Silver Incident Command Manager

Cranbrook water supply system overview (slides 2–3):

- Walked through the Cranbrook Water Supply System overview video and network diagram.
- Two inlet sources feed the Cranbrook storage network: Goudhurst (approx. 66% of flow) and Bewl/Bedgebury (approx. 34% of flow).
- Water is held across four storage cells (Cell 3a: 5.5ML, Cell 3b: 5.5ML, Cell 1: 5.4ML, Cell 2: 5.6ML) before being fed out to Cranbrook Village (15.0 l/s), Benenden South (42.0 l/s) and a booster supply to Cranbrook South (3 l/s), plus further feeds to Biddenden, Kingsnorth, St Michaels, Slipmill and a booster supply to SanTERS Court.
- Explained that as storage levels fall, properties on higher ground and at the edges of the network lose pressure first, because supply pressure depends on the water "head" (height/volume) held in the storage cells — this is part of why some properties experienced repeated low pressure or outages while others nearby did not.
- Described a normal daily demand cycle (higher demand morning/evening, lower demand overnight) which normally allows storage to recover overnight; during the recent hot, dry spell, sustained high daytime demand combined with reduced overnight recovery meant storage levels fell faster than the water processing capacity could refill, which was the root cause of the repeated outages over recent weeks.

What's been done so far and short-term actions (slides 4–5):

- Updated emergency standby rotas so engineers can respond to site faults faster and reduce downtime.
- Installed four new air valves at key locations to prevent trapped air and help supplies return faster after an outage.
- Fitted five digital loggers across the local network to track water flow and pressure in real time, enabling action ahead of an interruption (a resident later asked where exactly these are sited — see Q&A).
- Moved extra technicians into the Cranbrook/Benenden area, a priority zone, to assess and fix reported leaks faster.
- Current leakage in Resource Zone 7 is 7.1 million litres a day; the company's target is to reduce this by 1.6 million litres a day by 2030 (this target was challenged by a resident as unambitious — see Q&A).
- Inspected more than 26,000 pieces of equipment across Kent to identify condition issues and guide investment.
- New dedicated contingency plan: if the Cranbrook storage reservoir drops to 15%, the plan triggers automatically, using tankers and alternative pipe routing to protect supply to Benenden.
- 12 new emergency water tankers and extra equipment brought into service to move water directly to critical areas during high demand.
- New dedicated rapid-response communications team set up to handle incident updates without overloading on-call/contact-centre staff.
- Built a fully staffed 24/7 control room that monitors the network live, aiming to fix minor faults before they cause supply loss.

Paul Lonsdale — Investment Delivery Director

Paul Lonsdale introduced himself as roughly six months into the role, responsible for asset condition/maintenance strategy and the capital investment programme, from minor upgrades through to major new infrastructure (he referenced a significant new works being built in Canterbury as an example of the scale of the wider programme).

Short-term plan (slide 6):

- Installing a dedicated battery storage solution at Goudhurst Water Treatment Works to protect against power cuts — Goudhurst has had around 20 power-related interruptions recently; expected completion Spring 2027.
- Reviewing the local pipe network by Spring 2027 to assess whether permanent air valves are needed, to help restore supply faster if an issue occurs.
- Carrying out detailed site risk assessments across South East Water sites to identify and fix performance risks early; due to complete December 2026.
- Set up a dedicated "accelerated minor works" team to deliver small, fast fixes across the Kent network.

Medium-term plan to 2030 (slide 7):

- Major mains renewal scheme launching Spring 2027 to replace approximately 23 kilometres of water mains across the immediate Benenden network (roughly a two-year programme), to cut local leaks and bursts.
- Upgrades at Pembury and Tonbridge treatment works (Resource Zone 1) by 2030, reducing that area's reliance on Bewl Water Treatment Works and freeing up extra water specifically for Cranbrook and Benenden.
- New water transfer link from Maidstone to Ashford by 2030, adding an extra 10 million litres of water a day of flexibility to the wider grid.
- Building the wider "Kent Grid": new interconnecting pipelines (including a major link between Butler treatment works and Potters Corner) enabling up to 10 million litres of water a day to move more easily across the county by 2030, rather than relying on isolated local sources.
- Installing smart digital sensors across the network to track live water flows and locate underground leaks faster.

Long-term plan (slide 8):

- New, independent treatment line at Bewl Water Treatment Works by 2032, adding an extra 7 million litres of treated water a day as backup for peak times.
- New pipeline link by 2033 to transfer water from the Tunbridge Wells system into the Bewl network, giving more flexibility to support Benenden when needed.
- Expanding local storage tanks and underground service reservoirs across the immediate network by 2035, to hold more water close to home and better absorb demand spikes and incidents.

3. Q&A session — summary of questions raised

The audio for this section was particularly hard to reconstruct reliably — questions and answers overlap and several specific figures could not be recovered with confidence. Below is a topic-by-topic summary of what was raised and the gist of the response given; uncertain figures are marked [unclear].

Q: How is investment funding ring-fenced, and can South East Water be held to it?

A: Paul Lonsdale explained that investment of this kind sits within a regulated framework — funding tied to specific outcomes is monitored by Ofwat, with financial incentives and penalties attached, which he said gives residents assurance the commitments will be delivered.

Q: The leakage reduction target (7.1 million litres/day down to a 1.6 million litre/day cut by 2030) looks unambitious — roughly 20%. Could drone-based leak detection be used?

A: John Halsall, having worked in leak detection since he was 24 acknowledged the target is challenging given approximately 9,000 miles of underground mains and the practical difficulty of detection even with acoustic and other techniques. The company expects to fix in the region of 20,000–25,000 leaks a year, plans to recruit and expand its detection technician team, and will trial newer technology including drones, though dense vegetation and terrain in this area limit their effectiveness. It was noted that around a third of total leakage occurs on the customer side of the pipe network (i.e. on private supply pipes), and a new pilot programme to help fund repairs to customer-side leaks is expected to launch within about nine months. Smart meter rollout programme is due to be accelerated. They already use drone and satellite detection where possible.

Q: Brigitte Santer How will new housing developments already in neighbourhood plans be factored into the medium/long-term plans?

A: John Halsall has been focused on that recently and talked to MPs, some councils and the Secretary of State tomorrow and will talk to the Housing Minister soon to say that we are going to start saying that we are unable to provide water in certain areas. South East Water is currently reviewing all 29 local planning authorities it deals with, with a decision expected within 6 weeks, after which the company will assess developments at a local level and raise concerns with planning authorities where capacity is a risk. He did not give a firm yes/no on whether development would be actively discouraged in constrained areas, saying this would follow from that review.

Q: Steve Simmons Given historic underinvestment and shareholder payments, bills rising, why should residents trust this new investment now?

A: John Halsall said there are 10 customer hotspots currently and by this time next year he doesn't want there to be any. He is making promises like these to all those areas.

Answering the first part is that the last 2 years were spent trying to secure the investment required with a battle which failed and they had to turn to the CMA. This level of distraction has been damaging.

Andrew: The last regulatory price review (via the Competition and Markets Authority - a process a water company has available to them if they are unhappy with their funding) eventually secured a substantial increase in investment funding for the current five-year period compared with the previous one [£1.2bn up to £1.9bn]. The business was focused on securing this investment through the CMA for the last 2 years. He stated 'there has not been an external dividend leave the group since 2019' and will not do so during the current regulatory period; any excess cash generated is being reinvested in the business, and shareholders have also put in £275 million of fresh equity in recent years.

Q: (Mary Cruse) What happens to supply between the 15% storage level mentioned in the overview video and the 12% level at which the formal contingency plan kicks in? Water pressure is also not always just on or off but sometimes low.

A: Jenny Rhodes explained that pressure loss isn't a hard cut-off: as storage falls, properties on higher ground lose pressure first because supply pressure depends on the head (height/volume) of water held in the reservoir. Between roughly 15% and 12%, higher-ground properties are at greater risk of experiencing an interruption even before the formal 15% contingency plan is triggered. Please let SW Water know if low pressure is experienced

Q: MC How is a supply "interruption" formally defined, versus a customer's actual experience of low pressure?

A: Jenny Rhodes noted there's a regulatory definition of an interruption (based on set pressure/duration thresholds), but that the team's incident managers can now see live pressure and flow data and can act on early warning signs — deploying tankers or other support — before a formal interruption threshold is even reached.

ADDED: An Ofwat water supply interruption is defined as an event where a property's water supply drops to a pressure of 3 metres or less (operationally considered being without a normal running supply), lasting for a duration of 3 hours or greater

Q: Will residents get a dedicated contact route, given how hard it's been to reach anyone during outages?

A: No - South East Water acknowledged the difficulty and said it is investing in better self-service information (FAQs, digital updates, sign-up for local alerts) so residents don't need to call in for routine updates, alongside improvements to the standard customer contact route.

Q: Amanda Garratt A detailed question on fire-fighting during water shortages: wildfire/agricultural risk — hydrants, ponds and streams drying up, and how does SE Water assess the risk and whether fire-risk is factored into investment decisions. Situation On Goddards Green Road recently, 10 fire engines in attendance, pond dried up, 2 bursts on the mains closest to the fire.

A: Jenny Rhodes said that the fire assessment is owned by KFRS as this is their area of expertise and directed to them. Amanda pointed out she has done this and is awaiting that information under the Freedom of Information act. Jenny said that whenever there is an outage they inform KFRS and this affects how they respond to calls and confirmed the company works closely with Kent Fire & Rescue Service, including direct links between control centres so they have full visibility on outages, to provide tankered or alternative water

support for firefighting when natural sources are limited. This not a new process but an improved process over recent times.

Q. Anna Douglas? Check. Residents have been let down by water deliveries to Rothermere Close and especially those on the Priority Services Register. They only received 2 deliveries, often blocking doorways whilst other areas of the village received excessive amounts of water and didn't even lose water supply. Communication after the village hall meeting then failed.

A: Kerri: She apologised and she was unaware of this and would look into this particular road as it had been let down by them. She understood the frustrations with water deliveries and noted that they struggled to get the balance between a good service and over delivering to homes. The Priority Services Register homes should have had water delivered as they are ticked off a list and this obviously went wrong. She would personally investigate further. They have trialled different services, timing and frequency including in Benenden. In the compensation and FAQ letters there is more information but they are being printed now for delivery.

Q: Anne Hetherington Where exactly will the new digital loggers be sited, and will they cover the areas worst affected (one resident cited 19 separate outage days since 26 May)?

A: Jenny Rhodes said she couldn't confirm exact logger locations on the night but that the principle is to prioritise the highest points in the network, which are the areas that lose pressure first and give the clearest early warning for the wider area; she offered to follow up with specifics.

Q: Tim Maw A wedding/events business on a farm lost water supply entirely during their wedding for 84 guests in extreme heat, and was refused any compensation, and the 3 water accounts are registered as domestic despite an established business with the farm registered for 50 years and the wedding business for 11 years. Tim had to ferry water from Cranbrook to the wedding repeatedly during the day. The wedding couple had to hire an additional hotel room to shower prior to their wedding and other guests did without showers. Tim faced a bill for their hotel and also refunded an amount over £2000 to preserve reputation and as a goodwill gesture to the couple. He has been refused compensation for this as he is a business.

A: Kerri apologised, confirmed they are aware of the case and that it was already logged and being looked at individually, and explained that standard industry compensation schemes for business accounts don't currently cover this kind of extraordinary business loss. In the first instance they ask if there is insurance cover available for this. The company said it is reviewing an "extraordinary circumstances" compensation scheme, with a decision targeted by the end of October, but could not give a direct commitment on the night.

Q: (Kevin Hetherington) Could the Cranbrook storage facility simply be made bigger, and can call-waiting times (cited at around 30–40 minutes) be improved by using a more modern way than phoning eg: self reporting?

A: On storage size, this was addressed as part of the medium/long-term storage expansion plans described above. The Cranbrook facility is sizable already and there is risk with storage being too big and water not moving fast enough and spoiling if not used.

On call handling, South East Water said the priority is reducing the need to call in the first place through better self-service updates, and early warning measure while acknowledging the scale of the challenge across its roughly 2.4 million customers. SEW want there to be no need to call on the phone because the agents only have the same information as the Aqualter and they want this to be up to date and accurate. A list or roadmap of improvements is with the IT Director

Q. Giles Robinson: About the need for tankers at Mounts Hill outages - will we get warning and how many properties need to be affected before they get sent?

Jenny: there isn't a rule, but as low as 9, we have to treat all areas fairly and the aim is for SEW to get better at picking up early warnings and taking action.

Q: A follow-up question about Mounts Hill not being reconnected properly during the outage, and why an alternative supply option via the hydrant apparently wasn't used sooner.

A: Jenny Rhodes described the incident command structure used during the response (a tiered "Gold/Silver/Bronze" structure covering strategic, tactical and on-site operational decisions), and explained that in this case the network layout meant an available option could not be used without risking supply to the wider area; several alternative engineering options (temporary pumps, alternative hydrant connections) were modelled and discussed during the incident but not all were viable. One solution using a taker was tested but failed and just pumped water downhill and not into Mounts Farm area.

Q: How many properties, or how long, need to be affected before tankers are deployed?

A: Jenny Rhodes said there isn't a fixed customer-number trigger; tankers are deployed based on an assessment of impact and risk, and the company holds additional tanker contracts to increase capacity when needed.

Q: I am an ex-SEW employee and want to thank the Clancy team on the ground who have been seen working hard on Goddards Green Road by the new developments. As far as the development on Goddards Green Road, when they approached you about the connection assessment and it was carried out with your water engineering team, you obviously gave them an offer with a number of steps to go through and I imagine there is a request for reinforcement or a request for infrastructure charges. These can be hundreds and thousands of pounds. In respect to this development, was there money set aside or was it spent elsewhere in the network?

Are you prepared to go on record and set out that this is a water scarcity area and look to actively discourage large scale areas?

John: I have committed in the next 4-6 weeks to make a judgement on all the 29 planning authorities and comment accordingly and once we have done that we will drill down to a micro level and start making observations to the planning authorities about all areas we have concerns.

Andrew: You are right, where there is a new development you would expect a contribution to the infrastructure, these are typically ring-fenced but I can't give you the specifics on that scheme but we will come back to you. We will see what data we have got. (for other developments in Benenden)

4. Closing

The meeting was drawn to a close with thanks to South East Water for attending and to residents for their questions. Any questions not reached, or requiring more detailed follow-up, will be carried forward to the next, meeting on 24 September 2026, chaired by the parish council and attended by South East Water. Residents were encouraged to submit any questions not addressed in writing via forms available at the meeting.

Thanks to SE Water for their presentation and answers, to the press, councillors & residents for attending and for their questions, to Tom Dawlings for facilitating the questions and to the team members (Lucy, Athena, Amanda, Nicky, Nikki, Sarah, Anne and Peter) for their work in preparing this meeting.

Thanks to Benenden Girls School for hosting the meeting and to the affected businesses who provided Impact Statements, as well as the WOBS WhatsApp group for raising awareness.