

Regeneration, Culture and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee

11 June 2026

Member's Item: Southern Water Independent Customer Scrutiny Committee

Report from: Bhupinder Gill, Assistant Director - Legal and Governance

Author: Nicola Couchman, Democratic Services Officer

Summary

This report sets out a response to a Member's item raised by Councillor Field, in relation to the Southern Water Independent Customer Scrutiny Committee.

1. Recommendation

- 1.1. The Committee is asked to note the comments from Dan McDonald in his capacity as Chair of Accountable Water Kent (a body who scrutinises Southern Water with an independent panel) in response to the Member's Item.

2. Budget and policy framework

- 2.1. Under Medway Constitution Overview and Scrutiny rules (Chapter 4, Part 5, Paragraph 9.1) Councillor Field has requested that an item on this matter is included on the agenda for this meeting.

3. The Issue

- 3.1. Councillor Field has requested that an item be placed on the agenda and the reasons are set out below:

"Following Southern Water's attendance at RCE O&S Committee in June 2025, I would request that Dan McDonald, Chair of the new established Independent Customer Scrutiny Committee, which has been set up through Southern Water to challenge Southern Water on its customer and community-impacting decisions, to attend the RCE O&S Committee meeting on 11 June 2026 to outline the work of the independent Committee."

- 3.2. At the request of Councillor Field, Dan McDonald has been invited to attend the meeting.
- 3.3 The Committee can use any of its powers in dealing with this Member's item, including making recommendations to officers or the Cabinet.
4. Background Information from Dan McDonald, Chair of Accountable Water Kent

4.1. Introduction

The Independent Customer Scrutiny Committee was established during 2025 following discussions between Southern Water and Dan McDonald, who serves as the Committee's independent Chair.

The Committee was created in response to growing public concern regarding water company performance, environmental impacts, pollution incidents, customer service and public trust within the water sector.

Prior to the creation of the Committee, customer engagement arrangements existed within Southern Water. However, there was recognition that a more robust, transparent and independent form of scrutiny was required if customer and community voices were to have meaningful influence over decision making.

Drawing upon experience gained through chairing local authority scrutiny committees, a proposal was developed to create a genuinely independent scrutiny model capable of challenging all areas of Southern Water's operations.

The result was the creation of what is believed to be one of the first independently chaired customer scrutiny committees of its kind within the UK water sector.

4.2. Role and Purpose

The purpose of the Committee is to provide independent challenge and scrutiny of Southern Water's activities on behalf of customers and communities.

The Committee examines a broad range of issues including:

- Pollution performance.
- Environmental delivery.
- Wastewater operations.
- Drinking water services.
- Customer services.
- Billing and affordability.
- Community engagement.
- Corporate reputation.
- Communications and transparency.
- Governance and accountability.

Unlike traditional customer panels, the Committee has the ability to scrutinise senior executives, directors, board representatives and shareholders.

The Committee's objective is to ensure that difficult questions are asked publicly and that customer concerns are properly represented within decision-making processes.

4.3. Transparency and Public Accountability

A key principle of the Committee is transparency.

Scrutiny sessions are livestreamed and publicly available wherever possible, allowing residents, customers and stakeholders to observe challenge and accountability in action.

The Committee believes that public confidence is strengthened when customers are able to see organisations being questioned openly rather than simply being told that scrutiny takes place.

This approach reflects established local government scrutiny principles and helps demonstrate visible accountability.

4.4. Activity to Date

Since its formation, the Committee has undertaken scrutiny sessions covering:

- Pollution incidents and environmental performance.
- Storm overflows.
- Customer trust and reputation.
- Community engagement.
- Affordability and vulnerable customers.
- The Camber Sands environmental incident.
- Corporate communications.
- Board governance and leadership.

The Committee has also presented findings directly to Southern Water's Board and has made recommendations intended to improve performance, transparency and customer engagement.

4.5. Community Engagement

Committee members regularly engage with customers and communities across the Southern Water region.

This has included attendance at public engagement events, community meetings and stakeholder discussions where members have been able to hear directly from residents regarding their experiences of water and wastewater services.

This direct engagement has provided valuable insight into customer concerns regarding pollution, affordability, communication and trust.

4.6. Relevance to Medway

Southern Water provides essential services to residents and businesses across Medway.

Issues relating to wastewater infrastructure, environmental performance, pollution incidents, customer service and investment decisions have a direct impact upon Medway's communities, waterways and environment.

The Independent Customer Scrutiny Committee provides an additional layer of public accountability by ensuring that customer and community concerns are raised directly with Southern Water's senior leadership and governance structures.

The Committee's work complements existing regulatory oversight provided by Ofwat and the Environment Agency and seeks to strengthen transparency and public confidence within the sector.

4.7. Future Development

The Committee continues to evolve and is currently exploring opportunities to strengthen customer engagement, increase visibility within local communities and contribute to wider discussions regarding accountability and governance within the water sector.

The Committee is also engaging with regulators, government stakeholders and elected representatives regarding lessons learned from the scrutiny model and potential opportunities for wider application across the sector.

5. Risk Management

5.1. There are no significant risks to the Council arising from this report.

6. Legal and Financial Implications

6.1. There are no legal or financial implications for the Council arising from this report.

Lead officer contact

Nicola Couchman, Democratic Services Officer
Telephone: 01634 332106
E-mail: nicola.couchman@medway.gov.uk

Appendices

None

Background papers

None