

National Drought Group: Learning from and preparing for drought

January & February 2023

Introduction

2022 was an exceptional year. It was the driest summer on record for many parts of England. Record temperatures exceeded 40C for the first time and we saw significant peaks in water demand. Drought conditions gripped most of the country and our water resources were under pressure with widespread impacts on public water supply, farmers and the environment.

With a changing climate, we will see an increased frequency of extreme heat and prolonged dry weather. We therefore need to learn the lessons of 2022, reflecting on the speed and intensity of this drought, and improve the way we manage dry weather and drought in the future, so we can be ready for a similar or worse drought.

The chairs of the National Drought Group sub groups and the Environment Agency brought together key sectors on 25 January and 15 February 2023 to identify and learn lessons to improve our preparation and response to drought in the: -

- short term by being more agile and considering actions that will improve resilience and operational response this summer and
- medium to long term by evolving best practice, collaborating more and improving planning

This document summarises the discussion and learning points, and provides recommendations to improve the management of and response to drought.

Day 1 - managing public water supplies through drought

On day 1 we reflected on the key challenges and successes of water companies and retailers in managing public water supplies in 2022; reviewed progress on implementing recommendations from the 2017-18 drought; and discussed key topics in depth to identify improvements for the short and longer term.

1.1. Heatwaves and peak demands

Record breaking temperatures and exceptional high demands were a particular feature of the 2022 drought. High demands were caused by increased water use by households and non-households in response to the heatwaves, and increased leakage due to soil movement from the dry weather. Many water companies experienced challenges meeting the demand, with some customers experiencing low pressure or loss of supply as water companies struggled to move water through distribution networks fast enough. Key points of discussion: -

- With our changing climate, we can expect this type of weather to occur with increasing frequency. We therefore need to ensure we are appropriately planning for acute droughts, heatwaves and peak demands. We need more agility and a fast-paced response to manage demands during these shorter duration events e.g. fast track TUBs restrictions. Do we need separate plans to prepare for and manage these events or can they be covered within existing plans? The plans also need to join up with others (e.g., water demand required to manage wildfires, and health impacts of heatwaves)
- Water companies need to undertake further work to ensure they are accurately representing high/peak demands in their models, both for now and in the future. New modelling will be required

- Network capacity constraints limited water companies' ability to move water through distribution systems fast enough to meet peak demands - investment required to improve connectivity
- Concerns about ability to treat water after heatwaves: rainfall - water quality drops - algae issues
- We need to work with the Met Office to see if we can improve early warning and forecasting for heatwaves, which is critical for preparation and targeting communication messaging
- Demand reduction is critical to ensure sustainability of water supplies, and we need to improve understanding of water demand and usage (both household and non-household), including how it varies at different temperatures to better target messaging and efforts. Smart metering is critical to provide this information. We should also consider whether customer research into water use would also help improve understanding of demands
- Discussion on whether we should look to develop a joined up, national, RAPID style approach to demand management to help implement national policies and achieve the ambitious reductions that are required
- Water companies used incentive schemes to reduce demand in 2022. We need to learn from these schemes and share best practice. We also need more incentive scheme trials to understand what works best, including when we're not in drought
- Acknowledged that reducing demand should not just be the sole responsibility of water companies
- We need improved communications and engagement with household and non-household customers to encourage more efficient use of water: all year through, not just in summer/heatwaves. There were several questions: who should lead the messages (government/water companies)?; what are the barriers?; we need common messages for customers; we need a water efficiency strategy and to implement actions; learn and build on experience of campaigns this year
- Water companies, NAVs and retailers need to improve their working relationship and communication, and share information (e.g. non-household - data on the user and their requirements)
- When does heatwave response move to drought response?
- Ability to manage leakage constrained as resources to fix leaks are in short supply, especially during holiday season
- Need to improve understanding and impact of private abstractors changing to public water supply during droughts / heatwaves. How do we manage and support this? For example farmers needing support for livestock welfare. Also need to consider the cascade of water needs if other abstractions are restricted and they switch to greater use of public water supply – potentially no environmental benefit if it is the same source.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Review and where needed, modernise drought measures guidance and legislation, to enable agility and flexibility in planning and implementing measures

Recommendation 2: Review and revise planned response and preparedness for peak demands and acute droughts, building on experience from 2022, to enable a more flexible and robust future response

Recommendation 3: Review and enhance investment and supporting frameworks to improve resilience to weather extremes

Recommendation 5: Further develop ways of working between water companies, NAVs and retailers to enable data sharing and improved communications & engagement with customers

Recommendation 6: Maximise the opportunities regional groups could offer drought management and response

Recommendation 7: Improve coordination, consistency and effectiveness of communications, building on previous work, good practice and innovation from 2022

1.2. Temporary use bans (TUBs) and drought orders on non-essential use

Five water companies in England, and Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water, implemented TUBs in August 2022, and all companies saw associated reductions in demand. Neighbouring companies without TUBs also benefited from the widespread messaging and noted demand reductions. Everyone acknowledged the code of practice for water use restrictions needed updating and a UKWIR managed project will deliver this update by early summer 2023. Key points of discussion: -

- The groups acknowledged the importance of TUBs as an early drought measure to reduce demand; and recognised that their timing is critical.
- Companies implementing TUBs earlier generally see more impact on demand. TUBs need to be able to be implemented quickly in response to significant peaks in demands seen during heatwaves, so we need to remove any barriers to their early implementation (both in terms of updating guidance/legislation on advertising and for example logistics of water companies sharing messages with customers). Need to ensure guidance allows flexibility and agility in drought planning and response, so TUBs can be implemented early.
- There was some reflection that an earlier drought announcement could encourage companies to implement TUBs earlier, as they are supported with national messaging. Southern Water implemented its TUB early in August and received a lot of the focus and media attention, so aligning timing with drought announcements and neighbouring companies would help. Is there a reluctance to be first? Linked to public perception of TUBs
- Question whether customer surveys may be useful to understand views on acceptability of TUBs and non-essential use restrictions. Currently there is the perception that customers view TUBs as a failure, rather than an important early drought measure. Is this correct? If TUBs are used too frequently, there is also the concern that water companies could lose customer confidence. There shouldn't be penalties for using TUBs, and we need a view from Ofwat on early implementation of TUBs.
- Some of the discussion focused on concerns for non-essential use restrictions, whether they will be acceptable, and whether the process needs to be reviewed as they haven't been used for a long time. Also, suggestions about whether they could be graduated as the drought situation escalates
- Initially, water companies did not all use the same TUB exceptions (e.g. on watering newly planted trees and on the use of hot tubs) and tried to align to provide consistent advice to customers. It is important that the updated code of practice provides clarity (e.g. on notice periods and updating the outdated advertising process) and enable consistency (e.g. on exemptions). Note: changing drought measures legislation (e.g. advertising TUBs) will take longer.
- Some discussion on whether there should be wider criteria for TUBs, for example for environmental reasons.
- The UKWIR project assessing the impact of demand that should provide the evidence on demand savings from TUBs and other measures
- Consider research on the impact extent of metering has on demand savings achieved through TUBs
- Communications with the market didn't work well during this drought. Need to see improved ways of working to share information and messages.
- Link with communications carousel: communications need time to work. There is a balance of sharing messaging with customers at the right time.
- There were some questions on what the alternatives are to using TUBs to reduce demand.

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1.3. Drought plans

Water companies enacted their drought plans early in 2022 as the dry weather took hold. The majority of the statutory final drought plans had been published in 2022 and quickly put into use. The intensity and speed of the escalation of the drought tested the plans and for some companies illustrated gaps in their planning. The overall view from the workshop was that the plans worked to deliver actions when used in anger in the 2022 drought but most agreed areas that could be improved, especially on timings, preparedness, and the need to be agile.

Key points of discussion:-

- Drought plans need to be closer to “incident plans” and kept “live” through updating and refining.
- Plans need to be flexible, agile and adaptable and allow nimbleness in response. For example, scenarios showing what actions are taken and when could include sensitivity testing to illustrate that flexibility.
- More testing of plans is needed. Plans are theoretical and testing will improve understanding of what is practical, e.g. time to implement TUBs.
- An annual performance check on drought plans should be required and not just as best practice. This could be in the form of a “health check”, reporting on position coming out of winter, risk for the summer, preparedness including drought permit readiness, testing, any changes to plan, environmental review.
- It was generally agreed that there is a role for regional groups in drought management and response - including creating drought plans, and opportunities to explore multi-sector planning, communications, be customer facing and signpost to individual company plans, that can then be more incident focused.
- Training for staff working on drought is needed across the industry and regulators and actioned annually.
- Improved guidance is required covering communications and actions with the retail sector, NAVs and non-household users.
- We should look at investment plans, including in assets for drought and funding to maintain and monitor the environment
- Level 3 actions and response needs to be tested.
- Explore better alignment with EA drought plans, including easy access to plans, on communications, triggers, environmental research and data changes.

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1.4. Reputation and communication stakeholder management

With much of the country in the grips of drought and responding to record breaking temperatures in the summer; the parched landscape told a very clear story and drought dominated the news, with widespread communications and messaging late July-mid August. The Environment Agency held a dry weather briefing on 15 July 2022 with UKSHA (formerly Public Health England); the forecast heatwave the following weekend saw interest focused on heat-related danger to life concerns. Subsequent media messaging was on point and sector communications well aligned. However, there is more work to do to improve communications and improve how we work across stakeholders.

The workshop discussion focused on ways to manage reputations by ensuring communications on roles, current situation and actions required (for example by the public) are clearer and more coordinated. It also explored ways to approach drought communication with different types of stakeholder considering their various needs and interests.

Key points of discussion:-

- Need to enhance general societal understanding and responsibility on valuing water and the importance of efficient water use. Consider how best to frame messages - is “availability of water” easier to understand than drought? Explain reasons for scarcity (not just due to lack of rainfall)
- Distinguish messages: (1) national level but also need local messaging and stories about response which people can connect to. (2) Domestic versus industry users need different messaging. (3) Who could front and fund any campaign?
- Methods: (1) Look at different ways of presenting information, e.g. visuals, videos, use all social media channels, data, mapping. (2) Use of data or mapping – need to explain context and ensure it’s easy to interpret (e.g. reservoir level is x%, what does this mean, what action is needed?)
- Voices – who are seen as trusted, recognised voices by the public? Who do people listen to? EA, Water UK and Defra are view as authoritative. Regional groups may not be as recognisable as water companies. Use of “friendly” media like Countryfile.
- Make sure all messages are complementing
- Can we do bespoke comms for different types of stakeholders? Or target groups: water companies have schools programme; previously targeted demographic groups e.g. via mumsnet. What else could we do, e.g. religious groups, gardeners, new homeowners being conscientious consumers?
- Timing: (1) What messages could be put out all year (water cycle / valuing water) versus in drought (careful not to dilute attention, so people still take notice when drought declared). (2) Prepare and share messaging in advance including warming media up to issues. (3) We don’t do enough at end of drought – what should we say and when?
- Focus of messages – what will spur action by the public? E.g. what benefit is there to water users of changing behaviour? Request not order “can you support us by.....”
- Ways of working on leading drought comms: (1) Would have been better for NDG comms side to have started before the drought - worked well so would be good to start earlier. (2) How to coordinate - NDG seen as good channel.
- Ways of working between NDG members as a stakeholder group: is action required to coordinate demand management and comms (understanding water scarcity as well as within-drought messaging) Does this require a strategic resource option type mechanism - that is, a national funded, resourced, timebound scheme? (Would apply to both household and non-household)

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1.5. Drought permits and orders

Water companies applied for drought permits to supplement supplies, with the majority of applications being submitted from September, although Southern Water submitted an application in July (which was later withdrawn). The Environment Agency granted 30 drought permits in 2022 (from end Sept to end Dec), more than in any other year. With such large numbers, 2022 provided a thorough test of the use of drought permits, with some important lessons on process, timescales, hearings and quality of permits. Key points of discussion:-

- The groups agreed there is still a place for drought permits, but noted that they are not fair across all water users, and they also need to be considered in terms of how they form part of the solution at the catchment and regional level
- It was widely acknowledged that greater preparation is required at the drought planning stage to ensure water companies are drought permit application ready (including considering which options are drought permits or orders) and the Environment Agency has reviewed environmental assessments across all specialisms
- It was felt that the drought permit pre-application stage was prolonged and policy improvements are required
- There was general agreement that an annual check of drought readiness would be sensible addition to the process
- Timings and trigger levels for drought permits included within drought plans should be reviewed and updated to allow time for a public hearing
- Improvements are required on advertising to:-
 - modernise the legislative requirements (e.g. newspaper adverts), although this will likely need to be a longer term change; so updates to the guidance are needed as an alternative in the meantime
 - ensure they are written in accessible language and are easy to understand
- Water companies need to engage early with potential objectors, and greater clarity is required on duly made objections
- Hearings generally went well where they took place. Early engagement and access to documents is important. It was helpful for inspector to have prior knowledge of the issues
- Guidance needs to be updated to reflect lessons from 2022, and include greater clarity on notice periods
- Concerns with resourcing water companies needs from consultants
- Environment Agency National Permitting Service need more agility to deal with drought permits
- The group recommended that water companies that have prepared/applied for drought permits this year should share their experiences and good practice.

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Day 2 - experience of other sectors (environment, agriculture, navigation and recreation) and collaboration with the public water supply sector

On day 2 we reflected on the key challenges and successes of other sectors in managing water needs in 2022 and discussed key topics in depth to identify improvements for the short and longer term.

Summary of reflections across sectors:

The speed and intensity of the 2022 drought impacted all sectors, and there was consensus that there is a need for better agility to respond to future droughts, including making sure that abstractions are better managed.

The EA briefly summarised the first workshop focussing in on the impacts of the dry weather and record breaking high temperatures on public water supplies, including the issuing of 30 drought permits. There were a high number of environmental incidents, S57 spray irrigation restrictions and extensive use of the EA's pumping and transfer schemes such as the Severn Regulation for long periods. The use of multi sector voluntary restrictions also helped reduce the drought impacts. We are now in an improving situation, but Devon & Cornwall and East Anglia remain in drought. The EA is focussed on drought and ways in which drought permits and abstraction licence variations can be improved to be more resilient to these events, including severe drought. Better comms to the public is key and improving the industry's drought code of practice as well as building on the recommendations and the work that followed from the 2018 drought.

Agriculture: How can we get better at providing real time data to be able to take high flows, when available, for agriculture reservoirs and generally share water better between and within sectors? The 2022 drought has increased emphasis on food security. The Water for Food group has set up a task and finish group to look developing water resources management and drought plans for agriculture for better resilience within the sector. This raised the issue of how these type of activities are funded.

Horticulture: The nursery sector highlighted its value for the economy and how it was becoming more resilient through adopting techniques such as trickle irrigation, rainwater harvesting, automated irrigation scheduling and wetting agents. However, peat free growing mixes need watering more often. There is confusion about who supplies mains (retailers or wholesalers) water to businesses and inconsistency in exemptions on temporary use bans. The sector highlighted that they needed more flexibility on refilling reservoirs over the summer and on regulations affecting future use of abstraction licences. Planning permission issues such as demonstrating sufficient water availability and overall high costs of applications for reservoirs and greenhouses was a concern.

Sports and recreation: Golf courses is a growing sector and their water demand (for irrigation) is by far the largest in the sports and recreation sector. There are temporary use ban exemptions for this sector, (including golf and race courses) for health and safety reasons. There is therefore little appetite for the sector to move from using public water supply to their own raw water sources such as using storm water reservoirs, and indeed little incentive to reduce water usage. By signing up to a Water Charter it commits businesses to creating a water resilience plan to finding non-public water supply solutions such as highways runoff and storage. Irrigation efficiency will potentially help reduce water demand but this is offset by the irrigation season over recent years being extended to a further two months due to changes in climatic conditions plus the trend towards irrigating fairways. There was a discussion about the de minimus abstraction volume of 20m³ before a licence was required and whether that was still an appropriate volume. How can TUBs be brought into effect so that they can be utilised more readily to protect supplies for agriculture and the environment and not just public water supply?

Environment: The environmental sector stressed the need for better explanation of Temporary Use Bans to the public on the benefits to the environment. There is a need to increase and expand drought monitoring, including for protected wetland areas as well as better co-ordination on wildfire management, while more nature-based solutions should be adopted to hold back and store water.

The Canal & River Trust (The Trust) emphasised that canals and waterways not only provide navigation, but also provide other purposes and benefits, including ecosystem services. They also support several important water transfers directly for public water supplies and other sectors including agriculture and industry. The Trust highlighted the water planning that they undertake within their wide network. In 2022 The Trust's reservoirs dropped to a minimum of around 8% in some parts of the network. This resulted in implementing progressively tighter restrictions to navigation and ultimately closures to try and reduce the demand for water (every locking uses around 200,000 litres of water which is passed downstream). The Trust annually spends over £5 million a year on electricity for pumping water around the network with a significant carbon cost. Around 15% of The Trust's network by length was affected in the peak of the summer by restrictions. Fish rescues and movement of fish was hampered by exceptionally low reservoir levels. The Trust has emergency powers but they need to be used at the appropriate time. There is an issue of needing to use emergency powers more if abstraction licence variations take a long time to determine. Liverpool Canal was particularly impacted by drought especially for navigation. There was good liaison with water companies for their drought permit applications which affected compensation feeds out of reservoirs that then in turn flow into streams and rivers. As well as drought impacting on the environment, business and navigation there also public health issues associated with boats not able to move, such as sewage disposal and access to fuel supplies for power. There can be problems refilling with cracking that could lead to breaches, structural failures and infrastructure issues following a drought period.

Water industry: The extreme temperatures drove significant increases in demand, and these were amplified by demand remaining higher than before Covid 19. Temporary use bans were implemented across 6 companies (including Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water). Some water companies were caught between old and new drought plans, and there was some negativity on implementing TUBs. TUBs have impacts more widely on other sectors (agriculture, environment, leisure etc), and there is recognition that the industry needs to take customers with them by improving language and communication. The National Drought Group convened quickly, which was positive. Drought permits and orders placed a lot of pressure on everyone involved, including at hearings, given the short time frames involved, so need to consider whether there are improvements to the process. There is a focus on balancing the call for implementing TUBs earlier set against imposing them too early, when the weather could change. There are requirements for a legislative review of drought measures. The water industry commented that some of the 2018 recommendations weren't acted upon and we need to ensure we keep momentum going while the drought will recede from the public and media attention.

Water retailers: Water retailers have been responsible for non-household customer engagement, including billing, since the retail market was established in 2017. There are approx. 1.2 million non-household customers, accounting for 30% of the water consumed nationally, which provides significant opportunities to influence consumption behaviour by leveraging retailer support. Awareness of the Drought Code of Practice was limited and it needs updating to reflect the current structure of the industry. Opportunities were identified to enhance the Code of Practice currently being updated, including joined up communications and consistency in exceptions which will help improve outcomes in future droughts. How can the non-household sector be better prepared for drought through accessing alternative supplies?

2.1. Planning for agricultural resilience

This discussion group focused on what is required for better agricultural resilience planning and what were the drivers and mechanisms for change. In terms of what went well in 2022, it was felt those who abstract water are realising that their supply source is challenged and are now making investment for resilience for examples on-farm storage reservoirs – assisted by grant aid and will only continue if this carries on. Improved communications with local EA offices has resulted in better managed water scenarios.

Key points of discussion included:

- Investment assistance needs to carry forward, amounts are large and needs to be supported by longevity of availability of the water source. CLA asking for high grant funding rate and for the different elements of the scheme; planning, abstraction etc. all to come together
- Drought plans by the sectors to be produced – abstractor group level first then regional and national. Wales should be involved in this work.
- Potentially need to review the winter refill period – change from fixed to based on weather patterns – with better data recorded.
- Look at ability to capture water to release later when low flows. Look at existing case studies e.g. Felixstowe and others that could be considered and shared with policy makers for future innovations.
- Need the evidence base of water needs and look at impact of the agri-abstractions as well as public water supply as part of the WINEP. Water For Food Group work has recognised that gap to include in the next round of regional planning.
- Review what we mean by Resilience? What is it for the agriculture sectors? Need to be very clear what we are talking about in terms of resilience
- Review what and how to get money that could support what a WRMP looks like at different scales for agriculture? Could be done quicker and allow those collaborative plans to happen
- Learning from others. Engage more with IDBs as they may have good ideas from the low water side of things as well as flood. Also, look at other countries for work on innovation and examples of what can be done to meet demands.

Recommendations

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Recommendation 4: *Explore how to enable long term agriculture planning and investment, to improve resilience*

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2.2. Planning for environmental resilience

The majority of the country is in recovery from the hydrological drought; but environmental impacts are likely to be greater this year. The increased frequency of dry weather events over recent years has impacted resilience and it is vital we take action to build environmental resilience, particularly because many of the interventions will take years to translate to environmental improvements. Key points of discussion: -

- We need to improve monitoring and baseline data collection and analysis where there isn't sufficient information, to better understand what the environment needs now and in the future. We also need stronger messaging on the quantity of water required and where it is required (and not just for rivers, e.g. also peat bogs, wetlands)
- Hands off flow/level conditions and compensation discharges worked well. We need to have the right protections and conditions on all licences to protect the environment. WINEP investigations will help improve understanding and put in place protections
- River support schemes can play an important role in maintaining flows for the environment and public water supply
- What does success look like? Drought is also natural.
- Water dependent organisations are willing to protect the environment (e.g. recreational sector), but differences in exemptions for temporary use bans undermine messages about using water sensibly and sustainably

- Using water efficiently across society, business and all sectors is essential, to ensure we only abstract the water that is needed from the environment. Need stronger messaging on water efficiency and demand management across the board, and for new developments
- We need a framework enabling better, more integrated data gathering and sharing between stakeholders, perhaps using a digital drought hub. This would lead to more and better quality data, and enable better preparation and targeting for building resilience in the environment
- Sharing best practice guidance to fisheries on resilience works well - we could possibly expand this by creating a framework to share best practice and guidance across the environmental sector
- We should define and specify triggers for an environmental drought. This could be used to declare an environment drought, and establish when it ends. These triggers could also help influence the timing and use of drought measures, and enable better join up across sectors. We need a joined up holistic view of what a drought is.
- Strong policy and strategy steer and direction is critical. Is it enough at the moment? Do we need increased links to drought in ELM?
- We need to drive focus and expansion of implementing a whole range of measures to keep water on land and build resilience (e.g. river restoration, catchment approach, rewilding, ELM, nature based solutions, natural flood management to hold water back when it is available and help recharge groundwater in some areas). Local nature recovery strategies are critical to drive measures to improve resilience. The long term environmental destination (part of the multi sector regional water resources management plans) will improve environmental resilience over the longer term, but will regional groups consider landscape scale interventions for nature recovery?
- Citizen science has an important role to play improving data availability
- Key challenge: who pays for environmental resilience?

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2.3. Collecting and sharing information

A large amount of data and information is used while managing drought events, covering a range of sectors. It is important that this is accurate and easily accessible across sectors, to enable the best possible response and management of the event. Key points of discussion:-

- It would be beneficial to set up a central drought portal, that is accessible by all, and can be used to share data, information, research, modelling, drought impacts and communication messages.
- E-alerts were useful to improve access to water when it's available. They are currently implemented in 2 Environment Agency areas, so it would be good to expand this across all areas.
- There was discussion around whether water resources prospects could be reported every year, for wide circulation
- In some places there is a current lack of live data in sufficient quantities on flow, abstraction and rainfall. Investment to extend this would help provide better quality data to inform decisions and management of drought events.

- Information flow and communication links between sectors to share data and messages is critical, so ensuring everyone has the right contacts is essential

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2.4. Options for abstraction resilience during drought

Anglian Water led on facilitating this session and showed how they had helped farming in East Anglia by facilitating water transfers into the fens. The Task and Finish Water for Food Group is making good progress on agriculture water resources and drought plans.

Discussion focussed on how to enable better sharing of water between public water supply and the agriculture and environment sectors. Key points of discussion: -

- Developing a mapping system to facilitate moving water from where it is available (e.g. from options such as water company recycling plants and borehole rehabilitation), to where it is needed would help improve water sharing between sectors
- Recognised this wouldn't be easy as there would be logistical and data sharing challenges of mapping water availability and water demand; there are practical issues of collecting and transporting water, and billing; and issues on responsibilities for co-ordination.
- Review needed to establish why options haven't worked previously
- Making legislation clearer and resolving regulation issues with the EA on how to use recycled water etc, so water can be moved around more quickly
- This raised the importance of needing better join up between the sectors, including on overall comms, monitoring and sharing of relevant data
- Water Resources East is setting up a drought multi sector group (including the EA, water companies and agriculture) to help tackle these issues, to enable implementation of options this summer
- Better planning required with incorporation of these options into water company drought plans is important to help drought resilience as well as learning from lessons in 2022 to help improve flexibility
- Water companies should look at making unused/emergency water available for other sectors

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2.5. Triggers for communication and engagement

This discussion focused on practical ways to communicate the drought situation and encourage less demand and more efficient water use. The groups explored triggers for communication and engagement; opportunities to deliver joined up / complementary messaging across all sectors and agree timing; and suggesting quick wins for this summer.

Key points of discussion:

- Recommendations on enhancing communications included: planning early, being more proactive, key voices to share their planned timetable of media moments. Also using previous research on information flow and demand management, such as RADAR project.
- Are we clear on what our different stakeholders need and how they can find clear sources of information?
- Water scarcity only seems to hit public awareness when it affects households' use. How to encourage more responsible consumers? Can we use environmental reasons to help with waster saving messages – such as impact of low water levels on crop growth or fish migration.
- Comms (between partners and to water users) on the evolving drought situation and actions to take could come out earlier.
- Water supply versus environmental drought require different comms to explain the situation, triggers, impacts and what water users need to do. Can we establish different messages for different types of drought?
- Can messages about in / out of drought status be clearer and more accessible – e.g. consider flood messaging approach / traffic light system.
- Any significant announcement – such as the first temporary use ban – can trigger a wave of further media interest - it would be beneficial to agree positions and increase awareness of likely timing for water use restrictions across areas and companies.
- Can the narrative include the long term picture and shift focus onto long term water scarcity, resilience, mitigation
- Quick wins included continuing winter water efficiency campaigns into spring and summer and amplifying messages from organisations in the same sector to increase awareness of, for example, ways to reduce water usage.
- In the longer term can we consider how to factor drought into wider conversations on, for example food security or planning regulations requiring new developments to have water saving measures?
- Finding information: Need information to be more accessible (sourcing and understanding it). Could we have a central platform of information? Linked to this – collaboration between NDG members on comms requires easier methods to share best practice comms examples, situational dashboards and messaging ideas and timetables more easily. Should options (including management and funding) be explored?

Recommendations

Recommendation 5: Further develop ways of working between water companies, NAVs and retailers to enable data sharing and improved communications & engagement with customers

Recommendation 6: Maximise the opportunities regional groups could offer drought management and response

Recommendation 7: Improve coordination, consistency and effectiveness of communications, building on previous work, good practice and innovation from 2022

Recommendation 8: Explore how to better share data, information and communication messages

2.6. Drought resilience and water efficiency for non-household customers

Timely communications worked well between wholesalers and retailers last summer with the roll out of smart metering starting to provide data to identify continuous use and leaks. Understanding of customer segmentation is being undertaken by MOSL. However, there is still a need to provide clarity around the respective roles and responsibilities and improve data sharing between wholesalers, retailers and users. Better identification and improvement of knowledge of licensed and unlicensed abstractors, non-essential users (e.g. hot tub rental businesses) and providing better incentives to dampen peak demands is required. Awareness of the Drought Code of Practice was still poor amongst customers with a need to clarify the whole suite of exemptions for Non-Essential Use Bans and Temporary Use Bans. Customers are receptive to impacts on bills rather than the water itself.

Key points of discussion: -

- There is a need to understand the possible shift of customers moving back to mains supplies from raw water abstraction, especially those small volume water users with less than 20m³ day demand as experienced by South East Water.
- Conversely there is also a requirement for better data on large commercial water users and how they can store and use water more effectively and efficiently, with better incentives for reduced water use.
- There is a need for targeted campaigns for businesses and non-households with a cultural campaign to change the way drinking water is used by focussing on the importance of water in the environment. A task and finish group will help to prioritise actions and tailor messages.
- Better messaging and clarity is required on the use of temporary use bans for golf courses.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: *Review and where needed, modernise drought measures guidance and legislation, to enable agility and flexibility in planning and implementing measures*

Recommendation 2: *Review and revise planned response and preparedness for peak demands and acute droughts, building on experience from 2022, to enable a more flexible and robust future response*

Recommendation 5: *Further develop ways of working between water companies, NAVs and retailers to enable data sharing and improved communications & engagement with customers*

Recommendation 7: *Improve coordination, consistency and effectiveness of communications, building on previous work, good practice and innovation from 2022*

Recommendation 8: *Explore how to better share data, information and communication messages*
