Summary of our Draft Drought Plan 2027

United Utilities

Water for the North West

Introduction

We provide drinking water to around eight million people and over 200,000 businesses in the North West of England, every hour of every day.

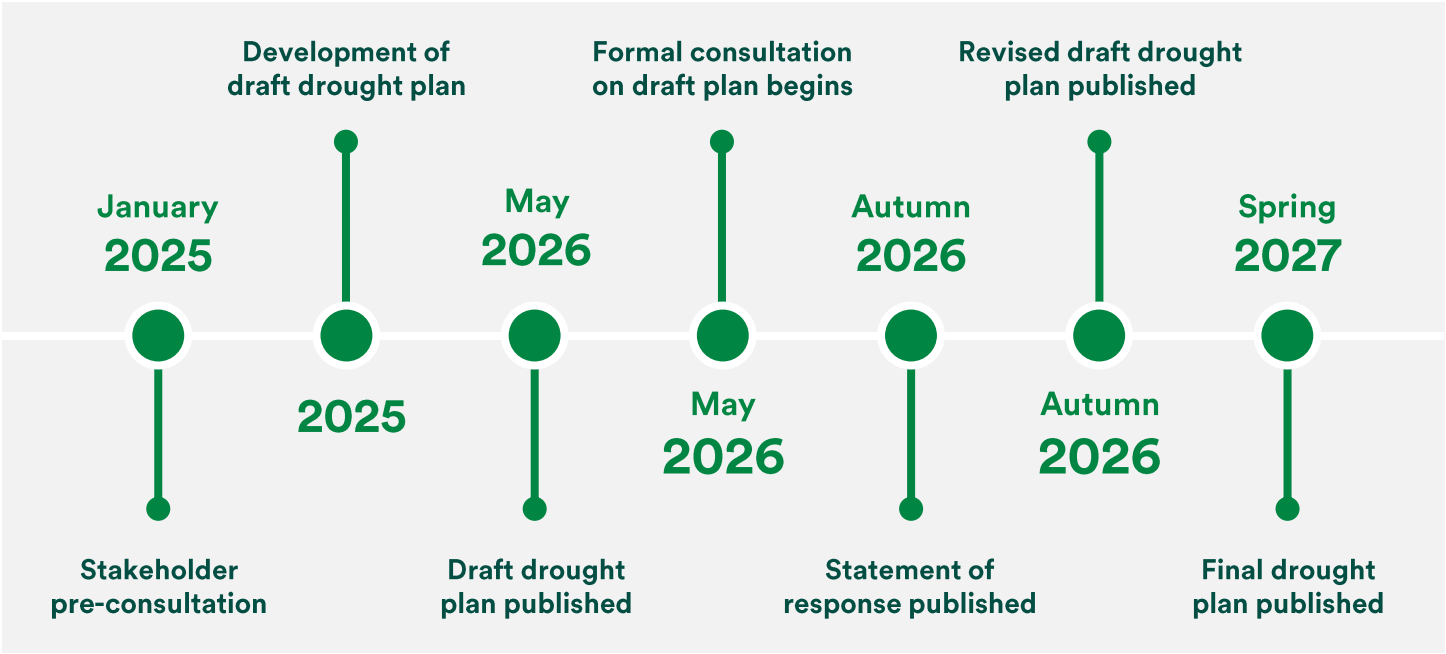
We are seeking your feedback on our draft Drought Plan. This sets out how we will manage water supplies during prolonged periods of dry weather and drought (rather than short term heatwaves), whilst protecting the environment. We update our Drought Plan every five years in accordance with industry guidance and in consultation with customers, stakeholders and our regulators including Defra, Ofwat and the Environment Agency.

It is likely that climate change will lead to droughts becoming more frequent, so it is becoming increasingly important to plan and adapt to such events. It is important we take into account the views of customers and stakeholders when we prepare a plan to manage droughts in our region.

Our current Drought Plan was published in 2022 and covers the period from 2022 to 2027. We are now working on our next plan, due to be published in 2027, which will cover the period from 2027 to 2032. As part of this process, we have prepared the first draft of our Drought Plan 2027, which we are now publishing for public consultation.

Following the consultation period, we will consider all responses and update our Drought Plan 2027 where appropriate.

The timeline for developing our next Drought Plan is summarised below:



This document is a summary of our draft Drought Plan 2027. We encourage you to read the full document linked below, which consists of a non-technical operational plan supported by several technical reports.

Draft Drought Plan 2027 >

Details of how to respond to the consultation are provided at the end of this summary document.

Our supply system

Our region covers North West England from Cumbria to Cheshire, and from the Pennines to the West coast. We own and operate over 100 water supply reservoirs, lakes, river and stream abstraction points, as well as numerous groundwater sources. Our supply system also provides water to support the canal network at several locations. Our supply area, covering 13,800 km^2, is divided into four 'resource zones', as shown in the map below.

Barepot Resource Zone

Water supply is from a river source, providing non-potable water (that is, water that is not drinking quality) for industry.

Average supply: about 22 million litres per day

Carlisle Resource Zone

Water supply is from river sources and one reservoir.

Population: about 119,000
Area: 1,025 km^2
Average supply: about 31 million litres per day

Strategic Resource Zone

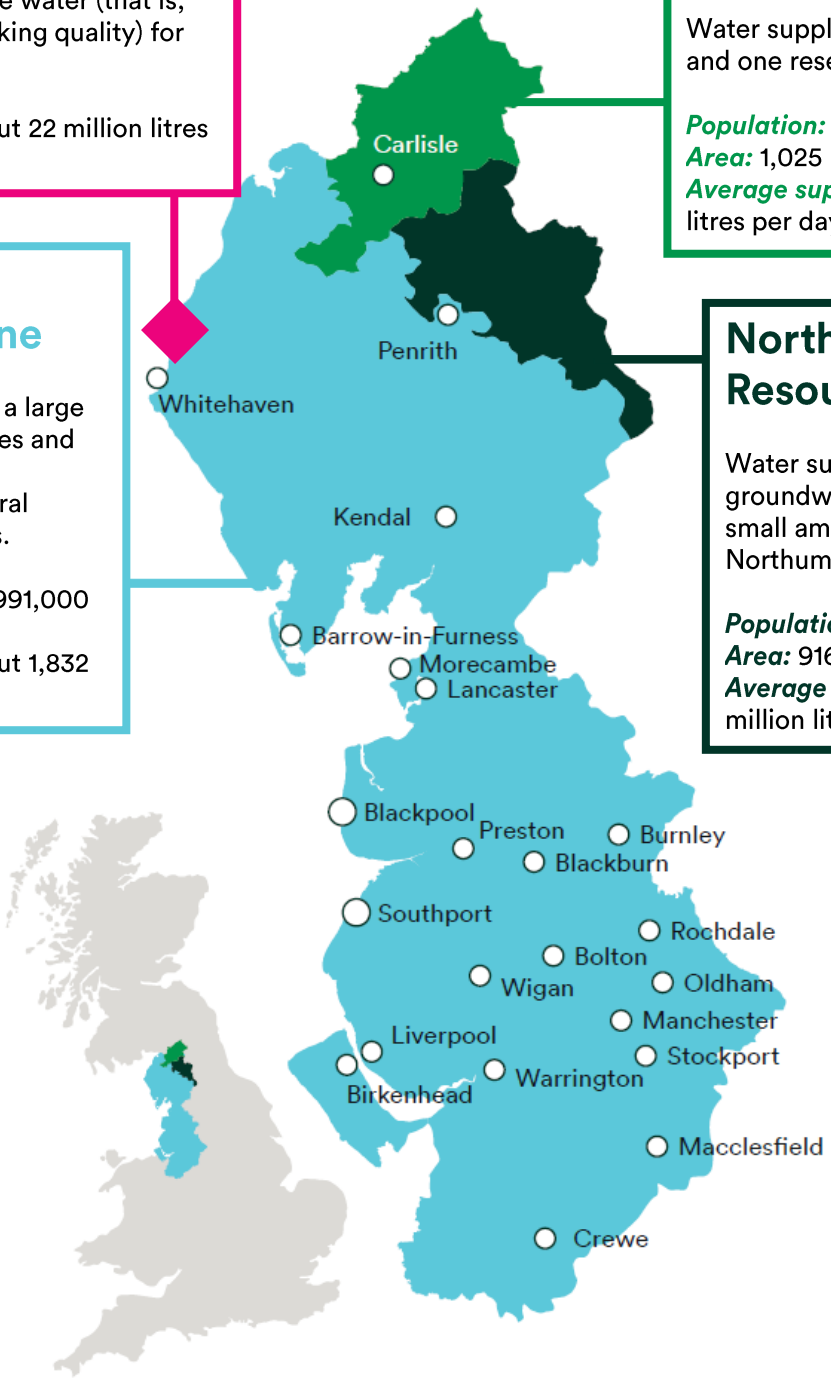
Water supply is from a large system of river sources and reservoirs linked by aqueducts, plus several groundwater sources.

Population: about 7,991,000
Area: 12,023 km^2
Average supply: about 1,832 million litres per day

North Eden Resource Zone

Water supply is mainly from groundwater sources, with a small amount imported from Northumbrian Water.

Population: about 13,000
Area: 916 km^2
Average supply: about 7 million litres per day



Developing our plan

In preparing our latest update of our Drought Plan, we have followed industry best practice and regulatory guidelines, as well as ensuring that our plan is consistent with other statutory plans. Our operational drought actions are underpinned by the best available data and modelling techniques to ensure that we manage our water resources effectively for the benefit of customers and the environment during periods of dry weather. We also draw on best practice from other companies, lessons learned from our own experience of recent dry weather events and insight and actions from working with our partners across the region.

Key changes since our previous Drought Plan

Our latest draft Drought Plan includes several key improvements to our previous published plan of 2022.

We have:

- Included lessons learnt from recent dry weather events in 2022 and 2025. For example, differences in how the Pennines are affected during droughts has highlighted the need for a more tailored approach to guide our drought actions in this area.
- Strengthened our drought communications plan, to ensure closer and more effective collaboration with stakeholders including customers, regulators, other water companies and water retailers, through improved message timing, stakeholder coordination and campaign design.
- Updated our reservoir and river flow data sets used in our water resource computer models, to ensure that our decision-making processes are based on the most comprehensive and up-to-date data sets available.
- Used the best available computer modelling techniques to guide us as to when to introduce actions at each stage of a developing drought.

Monitoring dry weather

Throughout the year we regularly collect and analyse data to assess the status of our water resources, and to identify whether our region is experiencing dry weather.

Some of the key indicators which we monitor include:

WATER RESOURCES INDICATOR	INDICATION OF DROUGHT CONDITIONS
Rainfall	Rainfall significantly below average
Temperature	Temperatures significantly above average
Soil moisture	Soil moisture much lower than average for three months or longer
Reservoir storage	Reservoir levels lower than normal and declining rapidly each week (or not refilling enough during winter)
River flows	Low, and declining, river flows resulting in abstraction being limited (the amount of water we take from a source)
Groundwater sources	Less water coming from springs and/or groundwater sources (groundwater is water stored below the earth's surface in porous rock)
Groundwater levels	Significant decline in groundwater levels measured at key observation boreholes in aquifers
Demand for water	Significant and prolonged increase in customer water use compared to normal for the time of year
Water resources modelling outputs	Analysis and modelling indicates water sources are failing to refill sufficiently

We monitor the key indicators shown above for each of our four water resource zones so that we can identify when a drought may be developing and take any actions which may be necessary to protect water supplies. We manage our resources by tracking the position against 'drought levels' (seasonally varying bands) to guide us as to which actions we should consider at each stage of a developing drought.

We have updated our drought levels for this draft Drought Plan. More information about our drought levels for each of our water resource zones can be found in our main draft Drought Plan report.

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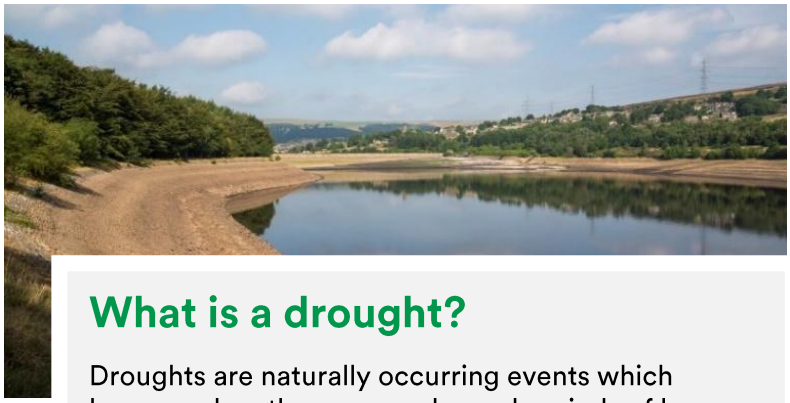

What is a drought?

Droughts are naturally occurring events which happen when there are prolonged periods of low rainfall which may affect public water supplies, agriculture and the environment. Each drought has its own individual characteristics, varying in geographical extent, duration and severity, and can affect water supplies in different ways and at different times of the year.

Actions during dry weather and drought

Our plan sets out the actions which we may take at each stage of a developing drought, from normal operation through to level 4 when reservoirs are below their normal minimum operating levels. A summary of our drought management actions at each drought level is shown in the table below.

At all stages, we will engage with customers, provide the latest information on reservoir levels and offer tips on how to use less water. This will be done in an engaging, informative way.

For more details on our drought management actions, see our main document and supporting technical reports.

Draft Drought Plan 2027 >

DROUGHT LEVEL	DEMAND-SIDE ACTIONS (Actions which aim to reduce the overall consumption of water)	SUPPLY-SIDE ACTIONS (Actions which maximise the available supply of water)
Normal operation	Deliver our leakage reduction programme in line with our stretching ambitions. Communication campaign to promote our year-round water efficiency programme.	Manage available sources every day to make the best use of supplies, considering the weather and operational constraints. Organise planned maintenance work to minimise impacts on supply.
Enhanced monitoring and operations	Prepare for enhanced leakage detection and repair, adjusting water pressure to help prevent bursts and save water, and moving water supplies around our network to direct water to the areas that need it most. Enhance water efficiency communications and promote voluntary demand reductions.	Set up supply system to proactively manage drought risks early and move water supplies around the network, taking water from more plentiful sources to areas experiencing shortages. Monitor local rivers to make sure they have the water they need and that we are meeting all required flow levels.
LEVEL 1: Increased risk from dry weather	Deliver enhanced leakage detection and repair activity. Localised pressure management activity. Campaign for voluntary water use restraint.	Manage system to ensure risk is balanced across the resource zone. Make changes to the network where necessary and postpone planned maintenance work if possible. Implement tankering if required.

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Actions during dry weather and drought

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DROUGHT LEVEL	DEMAND-SIDE ACTIONS (Actions which aim to reduce the overall consumption of water)	SUPPLY-SIDE ACTIONS (Actions which maximise the available supply of water)
LEVEL 2: Drought	Continue to deliver communication campaigns to delay the introduction of a temporary use ban (also known as a hosepipe ban) if possible. Prepare for, and introduce, a temporary use ban if evidence shows it is necessary. A temporary use ban restricts customers from using a hosepipe for various domestic uses including watering gardens and plants, cleaning motor vehicles and boats, cleaning domestic walls, patios and windows and from filling or maintaining paddling pools, domestic swimming pools and ornamental fountains. Details of the uses of water which are restricted under a temporary use ban would be specified in a notice published on our website, along with the procedure for applying for exceptions to the restrictions. Priority Services customers would automatically be exempt.	Consider where and when drought permits or drought orders from the Environment Agency and Defra respectively may be needed and put in place powers granted under these permits and orders. Drought permits allow water companies to temporarily take more water from specified sources. Drought orders are broader and allow water companies to take more water from the environment and apply restrictions on non-essential water usage. In a drought we may have to apply for drought permits at the following locations: Delph Reservoir, Dovestone Reservoir, Fernilee Reservoir, Jumbles Reservoir, Longdendale Reservoirs, River Lune, Rivington Reservoir (Brinscall Brook/White Coppice), Ullswater, Windermere, Bowscar boreholes, Gamblesby boreholes and Tarn Wood boreholes. We will decide which permits to apply for based on the circumstances at the time. The Environment Agency will only grant drought permits if we can show that we have experienced an exceptional shortage of rain, and that we have taken actions to reduce demand including putting in place a temporary use ban.
LEVEL 3: Emergency planning	Apply for and introduce a drought order to restrict non-essential use (dependent on level of customer demand for water). This type of drought order restricts business uses of water, such as car washing, watering sports pitches and commercial window cleaning, in addition to the mainly domestic restrictions which remain in place under the temporary use ban. In this situation we would also need to remove the exceptions to our temporary use ban, to further protect our supplies for essential uses such as drinking, cooking, and hygiene.	Consider extreme drought measures to reduce the likelihood of level 4 actions, such as engaging with regional water resources planning groups, Water Resources West and Water Resources North, about sharing water resources with neighbouring water companies, or implementing new temporary overland pipes to move water around the network more easily when our usual network is under pressure.
LEVEL 4: Emergency restrictions	Introduction of emergency measures such as allowing supply only at certain times of the day.	Put in place emergency planning procedures.
Recovering from dry weather	Gradually reduce drought actions as conditions improve and areas move back through the drought levels to normal operation.	Gradually reduce drought actions as conditions improve and areas move back through the drought levels to normal operation.

Managing supplies during droughts

Through our Water Resources Management Plan, which is updated every five years, we aim to ensure that customers can always rely on us to deliver water to their homes and businesses. Our Drought Plan is designed to help keep water flowing even during periods of drought. However, there are times when restrictions on usage are necessary to preserve water resources for everyone.

We use computer models to test how our supply system would cope with various drought scenarios. These scenarios are based on past and plausible future droughts and use the best available modelling techniques. This has allowed us to test our Drought Plan across a range of drought types, with the aim of maintaining the highest possible levels of service while safeguarding supplies.

Our levels of service

5% risk a year

Temporary use bans,
also known as hosepipe bans.

2.5% risk a year

Drought permits
from the Environment Agency, giving us permission to take water from specific sources or to increase the amount of water we take from specific sources.

1.25% risk a year

Non-essential use bans,
also known as ordinary drought orders, which restrict more activities than a temporary use ban and can affect businesses.

1.25% risk a year

Emergency restrictions,
which are alternative arrangements for supplying water (such as standpipes).

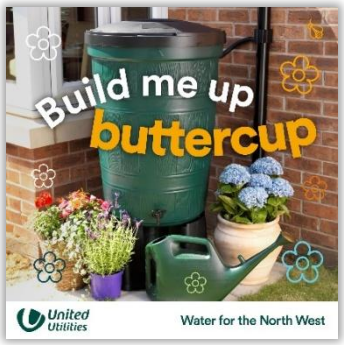
Protecting customers and water supplies during dry weather

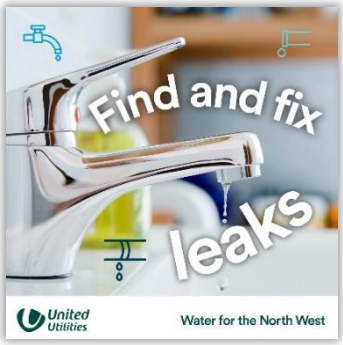
Water is a precious and limited resource, and we work all year round to encourage the efficient use of water. During dry weather, we increase leak detection and repair, reduce water pressure where we can to prevent bursts and save water and bring in additional sources of water. We also aim to help customers understand how low rainfall impacts water sources and the environment, so that we can work together to conserve supplies, protect the environment, and delay or avoid water restrictions.

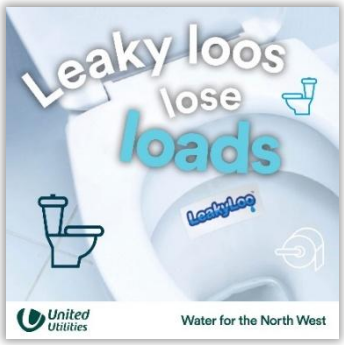
We have developed a flexible, tailored approach to sharing information with customers, and have tested the effectiveness of different campaigns and behavioural techniques to understand what customers find most useful. Our communications plan sets out how we will share key water-saving messages with different customer groups at each stage of a developing drought, and how we will work closely with regulators and stakeholders such as local authorities, agriculture, and environmental groups, to conserve water supplies and protect the environment.

For tips on how to save water, head to our website

Water saving tips







We use a wide range of channels to engage with our diverse customer base during droughts, including social media, digital channels, TV, radio, direct messaging, letters and other printed materials, face-to-face engagement, and school visits. We recognise that droughts affect people differently, so we use customer insights such as demographics, meter status and water use behaviours, to tailor messages to each group based on what resonates with them. For Priority Services customers we use their preferred communication styles to ensure information is accessible and easy to act on.

We work closely with local water retailers and business retailers, for example providing business retailers with ready-made communication templates to support consistent messaging for all affected non-household customers. Given these customers are affected by a non-essential use ban at Drought Level 3, which restricts business uses of water, we keep retailers updated on drought developments and water resource conditions so they can prepare and support their customers effectively.

During periods of dry weather, when water levels may affect the sources that support Canal & River Trust (CRT) waterways, or when our own supplies could be influenced by CRT operations, we will work closely with them to understand any potential impacts and agree appropriate management actions. This collaboration helps ensure that public water supply needs and the needs of those who use CRT waterways, including boat users, are carefully considered and well managed during drought conditions.

We also align our drought communications with neighbouring water companies wherever appropriate with the regional water resources planning group, Water Resources West.

Protecting the environment

Protecting and enhancing the natural environment is a top priority for us at all times of the year. During periods of dry weather and droughts, when a prolonged shortage of rainfall may have effects on the environment, it is important to ensure that the environmental impacts of any of the drought actions that we propose are minimised. Environmental assessment is therefore a fundamental part of our drought planning process.

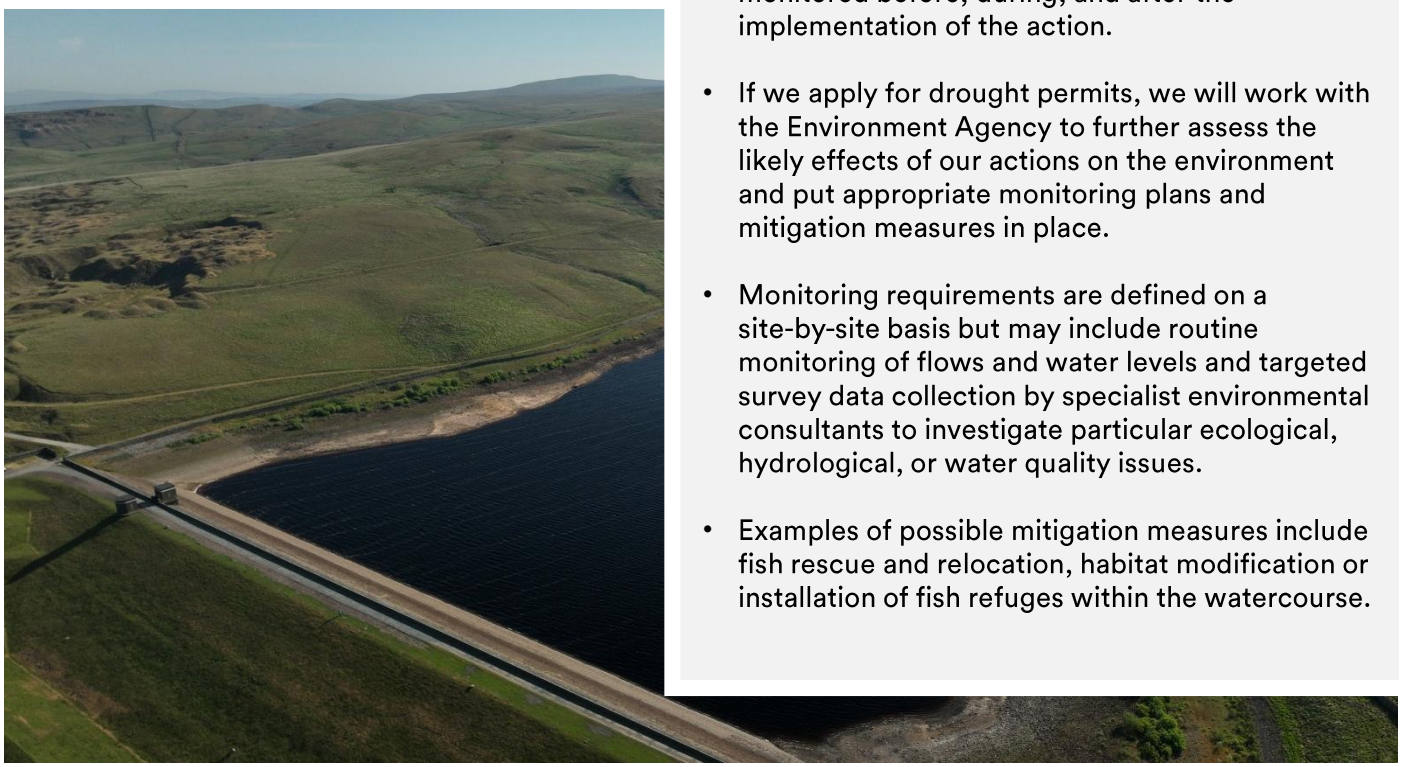
When deciding how to manage droughts, we will always prioritise the actions that have the least impact on customers and the environment. Actions which reduce demand will reduce the amount of water that we need to take from the environment and will also reduce our CO_2 emissions associated with treating and pumping water into supply. Therefore, we will always implement drought actions that reduce leakage and customer demand before implementing those that require a drought permit to increase water supplies.

As part of the drought planning process, we have carried out a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and a Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) to assess the potential effects of our Drought Plan on the environment. Our draft SEA and HRA reports are being published alongside our main draft Drought Plan documents for public consultation.

Our environmental assessments have concluded that in most cases our drought actions will not have a significant adverse effect on the environment. Where there is potential for some minor adverse effects (mainly associated with changes to surface water levels and flows, if we need to put one or more drought permits in place), we have identified mitigation measures to address these effects.

Our process for applying for drought permits

- Working closely with the Environment Agency, we carry out environmental assessments of all of our supply-side actions including each of our proposed drought permits.
- Our environmental assessment reports are compiled according to current best practice and are regularly reviewed to ensure that they are 'application ready' and can be quickly updated when we need to apply for a drought permit.
- Each environmental assessment identifies potential risks, proposes suitable mitigation measures, and sets out how the impacts will be monitored before, during, and after the implementation of the action.
- If we apply for drought permits, we will work with the Environment Agency to further assess the likely effects of our actions on the environment and put appropriate monitoring plans and mitigation measures in place.
- Monitoring requirements are defined on a site-by-site basis but may include routine monitoring of flows and water levels and targeted survey data collection by specialist environmental consultants to investigate particular ecological, hydrological, or water quality issues.
- Examples of possible mitigation measures include fish rescue and relocation, habitat modification or installation of fish refuges within the watercourse.



Recovery from drought

It can take many months for water resources to recover after a period of dry weather, so drought measures may need to remain in place for some time after rainfall patterns have returned to normal. For example, reservoirs may take several months to refill even if it is raining. During the recovery period, we will continue to monitor our key water resources indicators, as described on page 5, to help us confirm when a drought has ended and to guide our decisions as to when any restrictions can be lifted.

We will also take into account:

- the Environment Agency's environmental drought status for our region;
- the weather forecast; and
- whether the amount of moisture in the soil has returned to normal for the time of year.

Decisions on when to lift restrictions and/or end any drought permits which may be in force will be taken on a case-by-case basis and by working closely with stakeholders and regulators, especially the Environment Agency. We will notify our stakeholders and customers when there is no longer a risk to water supplies from drought, and when any water use restrictions which may have been in place, no longer apply. After a drought we will continue with an enhanced level of environmental monitoring to assess how the environment recovers from drought.

After a drought or a period of dry weather and we are back to normal operations, we will carry out a full review of our actions to understand what went well and what didn't go well, and to identify ways to improve our future drought planning. We will share our findings with regulators and stakeholders through a 'lessons learned' report.

During the preparation of this draft Drought Plan 2027, our region experienced a period of prolonged dry weather in the summer of 2025. We collaborated with the Environment Agency to carry out a formal 'lessons learned' review of this event. We have included a 'lessons learned' report as a technical report to our main Drought Plan document to provide an early insight into our experience of managing the 2025 dry weather event and how our findings have shaped this draft Drought Plan.

Have your say

Thank you for taking the time to read this summary of our draft Drought Plan 2027.

You can read our full document on the link below.

Draft Drought Plan 2027 >

We welcome any feedback you have on our draft plan. In particular, we are keen to hear your views on:

- **How we developed the plan,** including whether the key changes we have introduced are meaningful, such as our proposal for a new approach to guide drought actions in the Pennines.
- **How we communicate with customers,** and whether our current methods are effective or could be improved.
- **Your experience during the dry weather event in 2025,** including anything you feel we did well, or could have been better, that is not reflected in this plan.

The public consultation period runs from
18 May 2026 to 2 August 2026.

During the consultation period, we will engage with customers, wider community, regulators, and other key stakeholders through events in each North West county and via community groups. Details will be provided on our website and through our social media channels, as well as direct notifications sent to statutory consultees and key stakeholders.

Drought impacts and any related water restrictions will affect customer and stakeholder groups differently, depending on their needs and circumstances. That's why we will reach out to groups representative of the diverse customer and stakeholder base in our region, such as Priority Services customers, and those living in vulnerable circumstances, as well as agricultural and environmental groups, and local authorities. We want to hear your feedback and answer any questions you may have.

If you are a Priority Services customer and need information in another format or extra support to take part in the consultation, please contact us at the below email address, and we will be happy to help.

DroughtPlanConsult@uuplc.co.uk >

Following the consultation, we will review all responses received, make changes to our draft plan where appropriate, and publish a Statement of Response setting out how we have considered each individual response in preparing our revised draft plan.

How to get in touch

If you would like to respond to our consultation, all comments should be sent to both us and Defra at the following email addresses:

DroughtPlanConsult@uuplc.co.uk >

Water.Resources@defra.gov.uk >

Or by post to:

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Water for the North West