

UK Government Response to the Lords ECCC Inquiry into Drought Preparedness

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Ministerial Foreword

The threat of climate change is driving more frequent hot and dry summers, increasing our country's risk of drought with far-reaching impacts on both water supply for our use and on the natural environment. Last year we experienced the driest spring in 132 years and the hottest summer on record, with four heatwaves and below average rainfall for eight out of the 12 months. This year, we have already seen record breaking temperatures once again, with the hottest May on record.

I firstly want to express my thanks to the Environment and Climate Change Committee's Inquiry into our country's drought planning and preparedness in light of this increasing risk. The evidence and recommendations from this Inquiry serve as an important reminder that while we are making progress, there is more to do.

Government understands the far-reaching impacts drought brings and having enough water is critical to our environment, economy, health, livelihoods and our vital services that keep the nation running. As drought risks increase, we are ready to work closely across government to mitigate these impacts, and a significant amount of work is already underway to address several of the recommendations made.

I am determined to ensure that this country is better equipped to mitigate and respond to drought in 2026 and beyond. To do this successfully, cross-sector collaboration is crucial, with the National Drought Group (NDG), chaired by the Environment Agency (EA), being an important vehicle for this. Ensuring the country is resilient to a 1-in-500-year drought event is a top priority and through this collaboration, action to tackle longer-term water management and drought resilience through strong drought and long-term water resources planning, and a record £104 billion of private investment to support the development of nine new reservoirs and infrastructure upgrades to cut leaks, we will achieve this. Our ambitions for water reform as set out in [A New Vision for Water: White Paper](#) takes us even further to addressing the projected water shortage in the next decade.¹

Introduction

The Environment and Climate Change Committee launched its Inquiry in November 2025 to examine whether current drought management policies and practices are sufficient for both present and future droughts. It considered drought impacts, monitoring, public engagement, and changes in water supply and demand, with the aim of better understanding the effects of drought on people and the natural environment in England and identifying opportunities to

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-new-vision-for-water-white-paper>

strengthen preparedness and response. Following the Inquiry, the Committee published [a report](#) on 21 May 2026 with recommendations to strengthen drought resilience.

The Committee's report explored recommendations to support a more robust understanding of water use, reduce water demand, and to foster a whole-of-society approach to water resilience. The recommendations focus on better data, improved water resource management, and strengthened governance.

Our response focuses on the 17 formal recommendations made by the Committee, and we are considering the full range of evidence as part of a broader, holistic policy approach to cross-sector drought preparedness. Our response sets out the ways in which the recommendations have been acted on and where further action will be taken. The Government is committed to driving the implementation of the commitments made in this response.

The Government welcomes the Committee's recommendations and agrees that we must learn from recent events to strengthen water security and drought resilience across the country and that this is a key part of water reform. This is why we committed to making vital changes to the water sector through our recently published A New Vision for Water: White Paper, setting out our intention to ensure safe and secure water supplies, a protected and enhanced environment and a fair deal for customers and investors. The government's response to each individual recommendation is set out in the remainder of this document, with action to address key areas including:

- Through the Water Resources Management Plan (WRMP) process, the Government will continue to require companies to put forward robust programmes to reduce leakage, including mains renewal. Through water reform, further work is also underway to improve understanding and mapping of asset health, helping to accelerate action to improve pipe assets.
- Defra is working with Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to explore whether Building Regulations could be amended to tighten water efficiency standards and enable consumers to use less water and save on their water and energy bills. The public consultation on the proposed changes ran from 23 September 2025 for 12 weeks, and a government response is expected in 2026.
- The Government is already taking steps to strengthen early drought warning systems and communication channels, following recommendations from a recent cross-government emergency drought exercise. Defra is working in collaboration with other government departments, to develop clear cross-government communications on drought.

The Government is committed to actively engaging with the recommendations and will continue to take steps to address the accepted recommendations to strengthen drought resilience and preparedness.

<u>Government Response</u>	<u>Recommendation</u>
Accept	Recommendation 1: Conduct an economic and environmental assessment for each future drought scenario
Accept	Recommendation 2: Invest further in drought data collection
Reject	Recommendation 3: Water companies to be statutory consultees on all major planning decisions
Partially accept	Recommendation 4: Publish an assessment of the feasibility and cost of monitoring private water supplies
Accept	Recommendation 5: Strengthen the Building Regulations 2010
Accept	Recommendation 6: Reducing leaks
Accept	Recommendation 7: Communication plan for drought engagement
Accept	Recommendation 8: Assessment of the cost effectiveness of reducing demand, increasing efficiency and increasing supply
Accept	Recommendation 9: Clarify support for local water supply options
Reject	Recommendation 10: Expanding the remit of Internal Drainage Boards (IDBs)
Accept	Recommendation 11: Moving abstraction licensing into the Environmental Permitting Regime (EPR)
Accept	Recommendation 12: Role, responsibilities and reporting lines of stakeholders involved in drought planning
Partially accept	Recommendation 13: Regional Water Resource Groups
Partially accept	Recommendation 14: Plan for emergency drought
Partially accept	Recommendation 15: Nature based solutions
Accept	Recommendation 16: Drought monitoring portal
Accept	Recommendation 17: Modernising the drought permitting process

Recommendation 1: Conduct an economic and environmental assessment for each future drought scenarios

That the Government should conduct a full economic and environmental assessment for each of their future drought scenarios to enable the cost of drought mitigation to be balanced against the threat that drought poses to our economy and ecosystems.

The Government accepts this recommendation and recognises that data on the economic and environmental impacts of droughts in this country is limited. We are committed to further understanding the impacts of droughts under a range of scenarios, including under a reasonable worst-case scenario. Work is underway to update our assessment of the likelihood and impact of a reasonable worst-case scenario drought in the National Risk Register to help us understand the wide-reaching impacts of drought on the environment, economy and human welfare. An updated assessment is expected later this year.

We acknowledge the potential severity of economic shocks as a result of business and development disruption and infrastructure impacts, as well as the knock-on impacts to customer bills to support recovery from droughts. The Government is clear on its growth agenda, ensuring safe and secure water supply to support this important mission and we are working to quickly deliver improvements to water efficiency, boosting supply by building 9 new reservoirs, and cutting leakage by 17%.

Work is already underway to support the development of drought data to better understand the environmental impacts, which we discuss further in our response to the Committee's recommendation to invest further in drought data collection. We are also considering the development of a Drought Data Hub and an early warning system following recommendations from our cross-Government severe drought exercise held in February 2026.

Recommendation 2: Invest further in drought data collection

That the Government invests further in drought data collection, especially live monitoring of soil moisture conditions, to ensure that all relevant stakeholders have access to the information they need at the earliest possible opportunity. The data on water scarcity and drought indicators collected by different organisations should be brought together in an integrated, transparent, and publicly available database.

The Government accepts this recommendation. Good decisions to manage, mitigate and recover from drought depend on high quality and timely data. Government recognises this is an area in which we must continue to invest, especially as our changing climate increases drought risk and complexity. We also recognise the need to improve accessibility of drought data to support effective drought management across sectors. Through the Water White Paper, the Government has committed to improving water monitoring to better understand conditions, pressures and trends, while making greater use of new technology and more flexible approaches to data collection and analysis.

Government agrees that drought data should be accessible to all relevant stakeholders at the earliest opportunity, and presented in clear, useable ways. Better sharing and integration of data across organisations would enable earlier detection of drought impacts, support timely and informed decision making and strengthen public understanding of drought risks.

Work is underway to improve drought data and Defra is working closely with the EA and through the NDG to consider the development of a Drought Data Hub, an integrated data platform, building on findings from the [RADAR project](#) led by the UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology (see our response to Recommendation 16 for further information). In the interim period, the Defra Data Services platform and gov.uk are publicly available sources of drought information, including national and local area water situation reports, dry weather reports and drought reports. The Hydrology Data Explorer also provides near real-time data on rainfall, river levels, river flows and groundwater levels. For environmental impacts, the Ecology & Fish, and Water Quality data explorers provides access to macroinvertebrate, fish and water quality monitoring data. The national monthly Water Situation Report for England will be expanded in autumn 2026 to include the widely used meteorological drought indicators of the Standard Precipitation Index and Standard Precipitation and Evapotranspiration Index (SEPI). These widely used meteorological drought indicators will provide a consistent, early warning of emerging drought risk, useful for all sectors. Any potential Drought Data Hub would sit alongside or part of these existing platforms to ensure coherence across information.

In 2024, the EA began the installation of several soil moisture probes in their Herefordshire and North London areas, with additional sites planned. These sites provide live soil moisture content information into the EA's national telemetry system. However, we recognise that we lack full, high-quality data on rainfall due to a decline in rain gauges over several decades which impacts our assessment of Exceptional Shortage of Rainfall required for making determinations on drought permits and drought orders in the event of a drought. We will consider the cost-effectiveness of increasing the number of rain gauges to support these assessments. Further consideration is being taken on the proportionality and cost-effectiveness of emerging and innovative techniques such as remote sensing and environmental DNA could support earlier detection of drought impacts. In parallel, we will ensure sufficient analytical and quality assurance capacity (e.g. validation of hydrological data and processing of ecological samples) is in place so that data collected is robust and readily available for timely decision making.

Recommendation 3: Water companies to be statutory consultees on all major planning decisions

That water companies should be made statutory consultees on all major planning decisions, including housing developments, data centres, and energy infrastructure projects, to support water resource planning.

Government recognises there is a clear need to consider water availability in the planning process, aligning both our growth agenda and the need to protect our precious water resources. However, having carefully considered, we reject this recommendation.

MHCLG has implemented a new plan-making system which will ensure better join-up between water and development planning processes. This includes prescribing water and sewerage companies in 'Requirement to Assist' regulations so they will be obliged to assist with plan making where reasonably requested, and listing water and sewerage companies as consultation bodies so they will be made aware of key plan-making consultations where they have an interest.

The Government believes that strategic issues, such as water capacity, drainage, and wastewater management are best dealt with at a strategic level, where it is easier to identify and mitigate capacity issues or damaged infrastructure early, and which can act as a point of reference for planning application decisions.

Current planning practice guidance on Water Supply, Wastewater and Water Quality recommends that early engagement is undertaken with local planning authorities, water and sewerage companies and the environment agency to establish whether there are water or wastewater issues. Planning for water supply would normally be addressed through strategic policies, and so is unlikely to be a consideration for most planning applications. However, guidance explicitly lists the following areas as exceptions, in which water supply is likely to be a planning consideration:

- large developments not identified in plans that are likely to require a large amount of water; and/or
- significant works required to connect the water supply; and/ or
- where a plan requires enhanced water efficiency in new developments as part of a strategy to manage water demand locally and help deliver new development.

Local planning authorities are able to consult water companies on a non-statutory basis for planning applications that meet these criteria, and for any planning application which raises concerns around water issues.

The forthcoming Clean Water Bill will strengthen regional water planning, creating a more integrated regulatory framework, and improving alignment between Water Resources Management Plans and spatial plans.

On Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIP), as part of the implementation of measures in the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 that remove the statutory requirement for applicants to undertake pre-application consultation, MHCLG provided guidance on 3 July encouraging more effective and meaningful consultation on proposed Development Consent Order applications proceeding through the NSIP planning process. This included guidance recommending applicants engage with a range of stakeholders, including relevant statutory undertakers, such as water and sewerage undertakers, where beneficial to do so.

Relevant statutory bodies, including relevant statutory undertakers, will continue to be engaged as part of the examination stage of the NSIP planning process.

On 26 January 2025, the government declared a moratorium on any new statutory consultees in the planning process and on 18 November 2025, published a consultation on reforms to the statutory consultee system, which sought views on this. This consultation closed on 13 January 2026 and can be found on gov.uk [here](#). As of 14 July 2026, no decision will be taken forward until feedback to the consultation has been fully reviewed.

Recommendation 4: Publish an assessment of the feasibility and cost of monitoring private water supplies

That the Government should publish an assessment of the feasibility and cost of monitoring private water supplies to support a more robust understanding of water use.

The Government partially accepts this recommendation. The data for the number and location of private water supplies in England are not robust and likely undercount how many consumers are served by private supplies. To resolve this, the Government intends to give the new regulator formal responsibility for receiving statutory returns from local authorities and for providing them with relevant information and training. The digital requirements required for this function will be considered as part of the new regulator's design. The Drinking Water Inspectorate (DWI) has previously identified improvements to the data collection process to make it easier for local authorities to comply with their statutory reporting requirements; Government will consider how best to implement these changes as part of the new regulator model. The size of individual private supplies can vary widely, and supplies serving individual dwellings do not have to be reported to local authorities. Given the limits of the current data, and the work still to do on improving reporting, the Government does not think it is currently feasible to assess private supply water use.

Recommendation 5: Strengthen the Building Regulations 2010

That the Government urgently strengthens Part G of the Building Regulations 2010 to require new homes to achieve a maximum water usage of 105 litres per person per day, accelerates the uptake of grey water reuse in new builds, and works with regulators to provide incentives for households and businesses to implement water efficiency and water reuse measures. These changes should be implemented by the end of the next parliamentary session.

The Government accepts this recommendation. Defra is working with MHCLG to explore options for tightening water efficiency standards in the Building Regulations 2010 to enable consumers to use less water and save on their water and energy bills. Policy options on amendments to the Building Regulations were tested with the public through a consultation published on 23 September 2025. This consultation is now closed, and a government response is expected in 2026.

Government recognises that these regulations do not apply to non-households (including businesses and public buildings) and therefore different mechanisms are needed to improve water efficiency in these sectors. We have committed to enabling reuse in non-household settings through the upcoming Clean Water Bill in our White Paper following a recommendation by the Independent Water Commission.

Recommendation 6: Reducing leaks

Action to reduce leakage should remain a government priority. Innovation to identify smaller leaks, support for householders to address customer leaks, and mains renewal programmes should be accelerated.

Government accepts the recommendation that leakage reduction remains a priority. Sustained reductions in leakage are driven through a water industry commitment to halve leakage from 2017/18 levels by 2050. Water Services Regulation Authority (Ofwat) hold companies to account for delivering on this through an annual performance commitment process.

Water companies hold the primary responsibility for leakage reduction activity. Through the WRMP process, Government will continue to push water companies to put forward robust programmes for addressing leakage including through mains renewal. Through water reform, further work is underway to improve understanding and mapping of asset health which can help enable acceleration of appropriate action to improve pipe assets, including mains renewal.

To support leakage reduction, the Government is supporting accelerated rollout of water company smart water meters. Water companies are aiming to deliver approximately 10.4 million smart meters over 2025-30. This will see smart metering increase to approximately 50% for both households and businesses by 2030 (up from 12% household and 9% non-household in 2024/25). Smart meters provide near real-time data that improves identification of network and customer-side leakage, allowing quicker intervention and more targeted leakage reduction. The Government will explore further policies to ensure customers are being supported to address customer-side leaks on supply pipes.

Progress on leakage reduction will continue to be monitored through the EA's Annual Review of WRMPs which considers if companies have met the commitments made in their WRMPs.

The Government is also working with Ofwat to deliver the £25m Water Efficiency Lab (WEL). The WEL is a challenge-led competition to attract innovative solutions to specific water efficiency challenges and unlock progress on water efficient technology, processes and approaches, including leakage. The second WEL competition (WEL 2) on 'reducing customer-side leakage' is launching on 3 August 2026 offering around £150,000 – £1.5 million funding for innovative projects that help with smart insights and leakage technologies.

Recommendation 7: Communication plan for drought engagement

That the Government should ensure a communication plan for year-round engagement is in place by December 2026 to foster a whole society approach to water resilience. This plan should seek to work with all stakeholders in the water system.

The Government accepts this recommendation. We all must go further and faster to strengthen drought preparedness and be mindful of our water consumption.

The NDG is now implementing an updated drought communications strategy through its Defra-chaired communications subgroup. NDG coordinated communications aim to:

1. Maintain public confidence and trust during drought in England;
2. Increase awareness of long-term water resilience needs throughout the year, every year, not just during drought or heatwaves;
3. Increase the proportion of the public who think they can take action to prevent drought.

The strategy supports NDG members in coordinating year-round messaging to encourage behaviour change to use water wisely. It demonstrates clear government and industry action to ensure water supply and protect the environment. The group's strength is collaboration, pooling resources to amplify members' communications, which allows for a swift communications response to escalating drought impacts.

Over the summer, Ofwat and water companies are set to launch the Water Efficiency Campaign (WEC) across England and Wales. The WEC aims to reshape the public's relationship with water and embed water-saving behaviours into daily routines.

Recommendation 8: Assessment of the cost effectiveness of reducing demand, increasing efficiency and increasing supply

That the Government should publish an assessment of the cost effectiveness of reducing demand and increasing efficiency, as well as the cost effectiveness of different ways of increasing the supply of water, especially during droughts. Increasing supply includes reservoirs, desalination, reduced leakage and water transfers.

The Government accepts this recommendation. Through the WRMP process, water companies are required to undertake an appraisal of all supply and demand options being considered. This provides evidence-based justification for the cost-effectiveness of different strategies used to address the long-term supply-demand balance. A best value plan is then finalised and submitted in business plans for funding through the price review, including Ofwat's recent PR24 and forthcoming PR29 price review cycles.

However, costs and benefits are not limited to just monetary measures. For example, reducing water demand reduces the need for treatment and pumping of water which can save energy and carbon. A new reservoir can provide significant amenity and environmental value. These wider benefits should be included as part of assessments to determine best value for society.

We recognise that future national supply–demand deficits cannot be addressed by supply or demand measures alone, and that is why the Government is taking a twin track approach combining both options to improve drought resilience. The need for demand management options is the right thing to do to conserve our resources and drive the right behaviours, and to meet our ambitious demand reduction targets, complemented by best value supply options to resolve deficits over the planning horizon.

Recommendation 9: Clarify support for local water supply options

That the Government should clarify what support will be given to enable local water supply options, such as smaller reservoirs on farms, golf courses and other appropriate spaces. This includes clarifying how the Government will support the establishment of new Water Abstractor Groups (WAGs) and ensure local abstractors are empowered to deliver local resource solutions.

The Government accepts this recommendation and continues to encourage the establishment and strengthening of WAGs. These groups bring together abstractors within a catchment to share information, coordinate abstraction, and increase predominantly agriculture's input into

local, regional, and national planning, in particular by informing regional water resources groups' planning. Since the start of the programme in 2024, the number of WAGs has increased from 8 to 14, with a further three forecast for 2026/27.

In addition, our Local Resource Options studies are enabling small groups of farmers and growers to identify future water resilience projects in their areas including irrigation reservoirs. Over the past two years, the programme has completed 33 projects involving more than 170 farms, with 10 already progressing towards implementation outside of EA or Defra funding. The third round of Local Resource Options Screening Study applications opened on 25 May 2026. This round is also open to neighbouring non-agricultural businesses who could form part of a group. We are exploring options for expanding the Local Resource Option screening scheme outside of agriculture into, for example, leisure and industry sectors. The screening methodology is freely available on the EA's Waterhub for use by any abstractor.

Furthermore, we are committed to supporting the farming and horticultural sectors to increase productivity while improving sustainability and resilience to drought. Following the latest Spending Review, we are rationalising our grant funding schemes to ensure they are targeted towards backing British farmers and growers in creating a productive, profitable and sustainable future. Any future opportunities will be announced on the [farming blog](#).

Recommendation 10: Expanding the remit of Internal Drainage Boards

That the Government should amend legislation to expand the remit of Internal Drainage Boards (IDBs) beyond drainage to include wider water resource management to support improved water resource management at a local level.

The Government rejects this recommendation. IDBs are independent, locally funded statutory public bodies responsible for water level management and flood risk in predominantly low-lying areas of England. IDBs play a key role in the country's flood and water management system. They operate and maintain around 22,000km of ordinary watercourses, over 600 pumping stations and associated drainage infrastructure which benefits farms and food production, rural communities, critical infrastructure and transport networks, and the environment.

IDBs already manage water levels in an integrated way, for example, lowering water levels to protect farmland and properties, reducing flood risk during wet periods, while maintaining higher water levels in drier months to support crops, wetlands and wildlife habitats such as grazing marshes and nature reserves.

To support IDBs to effectively carry out their role, the Government provided a £91 million IDB fund (2024-2026) which supported 94 IDBs and 277 projects. The IDB Fund has delivered reduced flood risk to over 450,000 hectares of agricultural land and 250,000 homes and businesses, through a range of schemes from pump replacement to telemetry, and channel enhancements that retain water safely for agriculture and peatland recovery.

The Government is also exploring further opportunities to support IDBs. We have committed, as set out in the Land Use Framework for England, to publish new guidance for IDBs which may clarify their climate and environmental purposes, including to encourage the sustainable

management of water in areas such as peat rewetting for the reduction of carbon emissions and linked flood/drought management. We are also working closely with the Association of Drainage Authorities on a grant scheme (the “Lowland Peat Water Implementation Grant”) to fund the installation of new water management infrastructure.

The Government has also commissioned research into IDBs funding and costs. The research project which started in September 2025 is focussed on financial efficiency, value for money, and the broader benefits which IDBs deliver for rural communities. This will assess whether changes are needed to ensure their long-term sustainability. The research will conclude by summer 2026 and the Government will consider the findings carefully.

Recommendation 11: Moving abstraction licensing into the Environmental Permitting Regime (EPR)

That the Government should specify the date by which it plans to move abstraction licensing into the Environmental Permitting Regime (EPR). This change should be supported by real-time monitoring of abstraction and sufficient funding to manage the transition period to the EPR.

The Government accepts this recommendation. Moving abstraction and impoundment into the Environmental Permitting Regulations (EPR) will modernise the current paper-based system, creating a fully digital and customer-focused service. It will bring most environmental permissions under a single legal framework, enabling more consistent, risk-based regulation, better use of available water, improved transparency, more effective use of data, and expanded online services such as applications, returns, and payments.

As referenced in the Water White Paper, we are looking to implement the move into EPR in co-ordination with wider water reforms. While there is no confirmed timetable, we intend to move abstraction and impoundment licensing into EPR following the Clean Water Bill. This change can be delivered through secondary legislation under the powers introduced by the Water Act 2014.

Defra is currently conducting a smart agricultural abstraction trial in the Cam catchment with the EA and local partners. This uses real time monitoring to inform abstractors through a dashboard on when they can and cannot abstract with initial positive results. The trial will also explore how this approach can be regulated by the EA in the future. The pilot will complete in March 2027.

The EA are undertaking a programme of work to replace legacy digital systems to help make information available for businesses to make strategic decisions about the availability of water and to manage abstraction in near real time, maximising access to water when it is available.

Recommendation 12: Role, responsibilities and reporting lines of stakeholders involved in drought planning

As there is a large number of stakeholders involved in drought planning, the Government should provide clarity on the roles, responsibilities and reporting lines of these bodies and publish an

organogram setting out how the different actors contribute to overall drought planning and management.

The Government accepts the recommendation and recognises the far-reaching and wide ranged impacts of drought and the potential of drought to cause disruptive challenges that could threaten, for example, human and animal welfare, the environment, and water supply. Information on roles and responsibilities is already available at [Drought: how it is managed in England - GOV.UK](#). However Defra will work with the EA and NDG to develop a visual representation of these roles and responsibilities across the spectrum of drought planning, management and response.

As drought severity increases, Defra is ready to work closely across government, arm's-length bodies and water companies to mitigate the concurrent impacts on vital services such as schools, hospitals, transport and the food chain. Defra has a clear understanding of the stakeholders involved and is updating internal governance processes for drought response.

Recommendation 13: Regional Water Resource Groups

That the Government should give Regional Water Resource Groups statutory authority and set clear guidelines on how they should involve abstractors like industry and agriculture in multi-sector water resource planning.

The Government partially accepts this recommendation. The [EA's National Framework for Water Resources](#) sets out expectations for Regional Water Resources Groups for the 2029 round of water resources plans and how the groups should build on the achievements of the last round of plans. This includes an expectation that Regional Water Resources Groups will set out in drought statements of intent their role in drought management, including supporting the collaboration across all sectors to improve drought management and response.

The government and the EA are fully supportive of the Regional Water Resources Groups' work and their enhancement of multisector water resources planning. We will work closely with the Regional Water Resources Groups and provide financial support to improve the non-water company abstractor element of their planning. We are considering opportunities to rationalise and better align existing planning functions and resource, such as River Basin Management Planning, regional water resource groups, catchment partnerships, and Regional Flood and Coastal Committees.

In the Government's White Paper 'A new vision for Water' we committed to introduce an enhanced regional planning function, to better coordinate water environment and supply planning. We will want to see the Regional Water Resources Groups play a key role in regional planning going forwards and Regional Water Resource Groups are represented in our Regional Planning Steering Group, to support scoping and co-designing the framework.

Recommendation 14: Plan for emergency drought

That Government should publish a prioritisation plan for an emergency drought by no later than autumn 2026. The plan should be clearly communicated to all sectors and stakeholders, including the public, to ensure that they can prepare accordingly.

The Government partially accepts this recommendation. We recognise the importance of clear and effective planning to manage severe drought scenarios. The current regulatory framework already provides for a structured escalation of demand and supply measures as drought conditions intensify. This includes actions available to water companies and regulators, such as Temporary Use Bans (TUBs), Non-Essential Use Bans (NEUBs), drought permits and orders. Government has also asked companies to plan for emergency drought measures during an emergency drought scenario where these become necessary. This is increasingly important following record-breaking temperatures we've seen in May and June this year. Government is clear that water companies should be well-prepared ahead of any potential severe or emergency drought to ensure customers and the environment is protected as far as possible.

This staged escalation framework provides an important basis for managing water scarcity during drought, and ensures measures are introduced proportionately in response to the severity of conditions. Before determining whether further prioritisation guidance is required, the Government must first fully assess the robustness of existing arrangements. Specifically, we will soon be reviewing the first tranche of emergency drought plans submitted by water companies, including how and when they would transition to emergency drought measures. This will ensure we have a clear and evidence-based understanding of how prioritisation would operate in practice during extreme scenarios.

Following this assessment, the Government will consider whether additional guidance or frameworks are needed to sit alongside the existing escalation mechanisms, including whether further clarity on prioritisation across sectors would add value. Any future approach would be developed in close collaboration with water companies, regulators, and other Critical National Infrastructure sectors to ensure it is practical and proportionate. It would not be appropriate for the Government to publish detailed plans in full, given the sensitive nature of these potential emergency plans and their implications for national security.

Recommendation 15: Nature based solutions

Nature-based solutions (NbS) in both the urban and rural environment must be prioritised as a first line of defence to manage the increasing risk of both flooding and drought. Though they are not a panacea, they remain a key part of managing drought risk.

Water regulators have issued joint guidance to water companies to develop revised WRMPs, which includes greater emphasis on the use of NbS, and the EA has published a [position statement on using NbS to support sustainable water resources planning](#).

The EA plans to publish a handbook on NbS for water resources in summer 2026. This will set out how to use NbS to support water resources and design NbS projects to realise the benefits described in the EA's position statement. The Government is working with partners to pilot NbS in the Cam and Wensum catchments to understand how NbS can support groundwater supplies

and strengthen long-term water resilience. These pilots are the first of their kind and will help build a robust evidence base which will inform water company water resources planning.

The Government recognises flood and drought risk may be managed through similar NbS approaches, with individual schemes potentially having cross-benefits. Natural flood management (NFM) is playing an increasingly prominent role in our approach to mitigating flood risk and also provides wider benefits for the environment and society, such as carbon reduction, environmental enhancement, improving water quality and water resources.

The Government is already taking steps to support increased NFM where it can be effective. Under the Government's new flood programme, we are committed to investing £300 million in standalone NFM schemes between now and 2036, to support the mainstreaming of delivery of NFM and ensure a minimum level of investment.

Recommendation 16: Drought monitoring portal

That the Government creates an open access live drought monitoring portal which can be used by national, regional and local drought responders to trigger early mitigation action before drought impacts manifest.

The Government accepts this recommendation, and work to take this forward is underway as in line with our response to Recommendation 2 above. Accessible information to enable early action across government, water companies and local responders is key to mitigating the development and impacts of drought on our environment, economy and society.

We are already taking steps to strengthen early drought warning systems and communication channels, following recommendations from a recent cross-government severe drought exercise. Defra, working in collaboration with other government departments and external partners, is seeking to improve understanding and early detection of emerging drought risks, improve cross-government communications, and ensure effective engagement with both industry stakeholders and the public.

As referred to in our response to Recommendation 2, scoping for a central Drought Data Hub is underway, which would look at consolidating existing drought risk information into a single, accessible platform. Part of this early scoping will consider the feasibility and cost-effectiveness of embedding live monitoring of all drought indicators to inform a singular picture on drought risk from one source. As proposals are developed, we will consider existing research on best practice communication to ensure such information is effectively communicated to different sectors and to the public, so there is a unified understanding of what drought indicators and risk means for them, supporting the early action they can take.

Recommendation 17: Modernising the drought permitting process

That the Government should modernise and streamline the drought permitting system whilst simultaneously enforcing rigorous environmental safeguards within the process.

Slow implementation of drought measures such as TUBs, drought permits and drought orders, due to outdated procedural requirements leads to avoidable loss of water when it is needed

most during drought. Our main aim is to minimise the impacts of drought on the environment and society – this is achieved by securing water supply in a timely way.

The Government is reviewing the process water companies and the EA, where applicable, must follow to apply for drought measures, including drought orders and TUBs (formerly known as hosepipe bans). Part of this will consider modernising notification requirements to simplify and speed up the length of time in which drought measures are implemented, ensuring that necessary, timely savings are made to water resources during drought and we have a sustainable and resilient supply of water to homes and businesses. Changes are being considered as part of the upcoming Clean Water Bill.

The EA will also review the guidance for water companies to apply for drought permits during 2026 and explore changes to processes in the longer term to support a regulatory framework that enables a more agile and effective drought response. Drought permits allow water companies to amend their abstraction licences or to take water from a source to help public water supplies during a drought but there is a balance with protecting the environment. The EA expects water companies to have identified drought permits in their statutory drought plans, currently published for consultation over the summer, and have the necessary information on potential environmental impacts and planned mitigations to be ready to be implemented when an application is needed. Companies are also expected to consider demand reduction measures as part of their drought planning and wider requirements on early interventions to reduce demand and increase water efficiency, as part of business-as-usual working.