

England is **Still** Not Prepared for Drought



**WATER SECURITY AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL
CONSEQUENCES OF DELAY**

WildFish.

Summary

England remains dangerously exposed to drought. The risks we identified in the first edition of this report in 2023 remain valid in 2026. Population growth, environmental degradation, ageing infrastructure and a changing climate are placing increasing pressure on a water supply system that is already heavily dependent on rivers and groundwater.

Our analysis of long-term rainfall records in this report adds an important dimension to this picture. England is not simply becoming a drier country. Over the longer term, annual rainfall has generally increased, while recent rainfall patterns show greater variability: more frequent shorter dry spells occurring alongside increasingly intense rainfall events. This matters because the availability of water depends not only on how much rain falls, but when it falls and whether rainfall can be captured and stored.

England's water security problem is not a shortage of rainfall. It is a problem of storage, infrastructure and demand. We are currently managing variable weather with infrastructure and planning systems that rely on environmentally stressed rivers and aquifers.

Recent years have demonstrated how quickly water resources can come under pressure. In 2026, England experienced an exceptionally dry July, despite cumulative rainfall for the year remaining broadly consistent with historical averages (Met Office, 2026c). This illustrates the vulnerability of the system in which even a relatively short period of extreme dryness can place significant pressure on water supplies and our rivers.

The fundamental challenge remains unchanged: England needs to get better at managing the water it receives. Since our original report, the final Water Resources Management Plans (WRMP24) have established a long-term programme of reservoirs, water recycling schemes, strategic transfers, desalination projects and demand-management measures. However, planning alone does not provide resilience.

Since privatisation of the water industry in 1989, no private water company has planned and completed a new reservoir anywhere in the UK¹ (GOV.UK, 2025). Most major infrastructure projects remain years from completion. Until they become operational, water companies continue to rely on existing abstraction licences, operational flexibility and, during drought, drought orders and permits that may allow additional abstraction from already stressed rivers. Consequently, the natural environment continues to act as the nation's emergency water reserve.

This report presents further evidence that England is still not prepared for drought and outlines the urgent action required by Government to stop dependence on the natural environment.

[1] Carsington Water was completed after privitisation in 1992 but construction started earlier in 1980.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL COST

England's rivers provide far more than drinking water. They support internationally important chalk streams, wetlands, fisheries and biodiversity, while providing a wide range of ecosystem services that benefit both people and nature. Healthy river flows maintain water quality, transport sediment, sustain aquatic habitats and enable the migration and reproduction of fish and other freshwater species.

Prolonged periods of low flow reduce the availability and quality of habitat, disrupt migration and breeding, and increase vulnerability to disease, invasive non-native species and pollution (Rolls et al., 2012). Species that depend on cool, well-oxygenated water, including Atlantic salmon and brown trout, are particularly sensitive to rising water temperatures and declining summer flows (Walsh & Kilsby, 2007).

Low flows also reduce the ability of rivers to dilute pollutants from sewage treatment works, agricultural runoff and urban drainage (Whitehead, Wade, et al., 2009). Consequently, the ecological impacts of drought are often magnified by poorer water quality, creating multiple interacting pressures on freshwater ecosystems.

During drought, when river ecosystems are already under their greatest natural stress, water companies may seek temporary drought permits, drought orders or other operational flexibilities that allow additional abstraction from rivers or groundwater.

Although these powers are intended only for exceptional circumstances, their continued use reflects the limited resilience of England's water supply system and its continued dependence on the natural environment during periods of water scarcity.

England's freshwater ecosystems are already among the most degraded in Europe.

Just 14.3% of England's surface waters achieved good ecological status, compared to the European average of 40%.

(EEA, 2018; Environment Agency, 2026)



Howden Reservoir, Howden Clough, July 2026. ©WildFish

The data

Is climate changing, and how does it affect water supply?

England's water system is entering a period of unprecedented pressure. This is not a surprise and was foreseen.

Population growth, climate change, environmental degradation and decades of underinvestment in strategic water infrastructure are converging to create a national water security challenge that can no longer be regarded as a future risk, but a present day threat.

Severe droughts have historically been viewed as exceptional events, such as the infamous drought of 1976.

However, the number of droughts declared in recent years is seemingly increasing; official figures show **England has experienced major droughts in three out of the last five years** (2022, 2025, and 2026).

Recent years have also broken multiple historic heat records, with **summer 2026 being the hottest on record** and the **40°C threshold being breached for the first time in 2022** (Met Office, 2022, 2026d).



Ladybower Reservoir, Derbyshire, July 2026.
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Climate change has been suggested as a major driving force behind the recent increase in droughts; however, precipitation data shows this is not necessarily the case.

Table 1: Seasonal rainfall change by region over the past 50 years (2001–2025 vs. 1976–2000 baseline)

Region	Winter	Spring	Summer	Autumn	Annual	Wettest Season	Driest Season
South East England	8.5%	-4.7%	10.0%	3.2%	4.3%	Summer (+10.0%)	Spring (-4.7%)
SW Eng & S Wales	0.0%	-3.7%	14.3%	1.2%	2.2%	Summer (+14.3%)	Spring (-3.7%)
Central England	0.2%	-8.0%	15.6%	4.9%	3.4%	Summer (+15.6%)	Spring (-8.0%)
NW Eng & N Wales	3.5%	-6.8%	17.9%	4.7%	4.9%	Summer (+17.9%)	Spring (-6.8%)
North East England	0.3%	-8.8%	27.7%	9.3%	6.8%	Summer (+27.7%)	Spring (-8.8%)

* Percentage changes reflect mean seasonal and annual precipitation shifts between 1976–2000 and 2001–2025.

When comparing the past 50 years of precipitation (since the 1976 drought), rather than declining summer rainfall, England and Wales have generally become wetter.

The data shown in Table 1 above compares average seasonal rainfall between two 25-year periods: 1976–2000 and 2001–2025. Across all five regions, the pattern is consistent. Summer rainfall has increased substantially in every region (+10% to +28%), meaning more water is falling during the period of peak demand. Annual rainfall totals have increased in every region (+2% to +7%), indicating overall wetter conditions. Spring rainfall has decreased in all regions (-4% to -9%), indicating that when rain is falling is shifting.

So, when looking at the past 50 years in isolation, the narrative of increasingly wetter winters and drier summers is not true at regional scale. However, to fully understand long-term shifts in precipitation, it is better to examine climate records in longer 30-year rolling averages relative to a baseline period. In the UK, precipitation records date back as far as the 1700s, but regional level reporting began in the 1930s, allowing us to look at the regional precipitation shifts over the past 95 years across England and Wales.

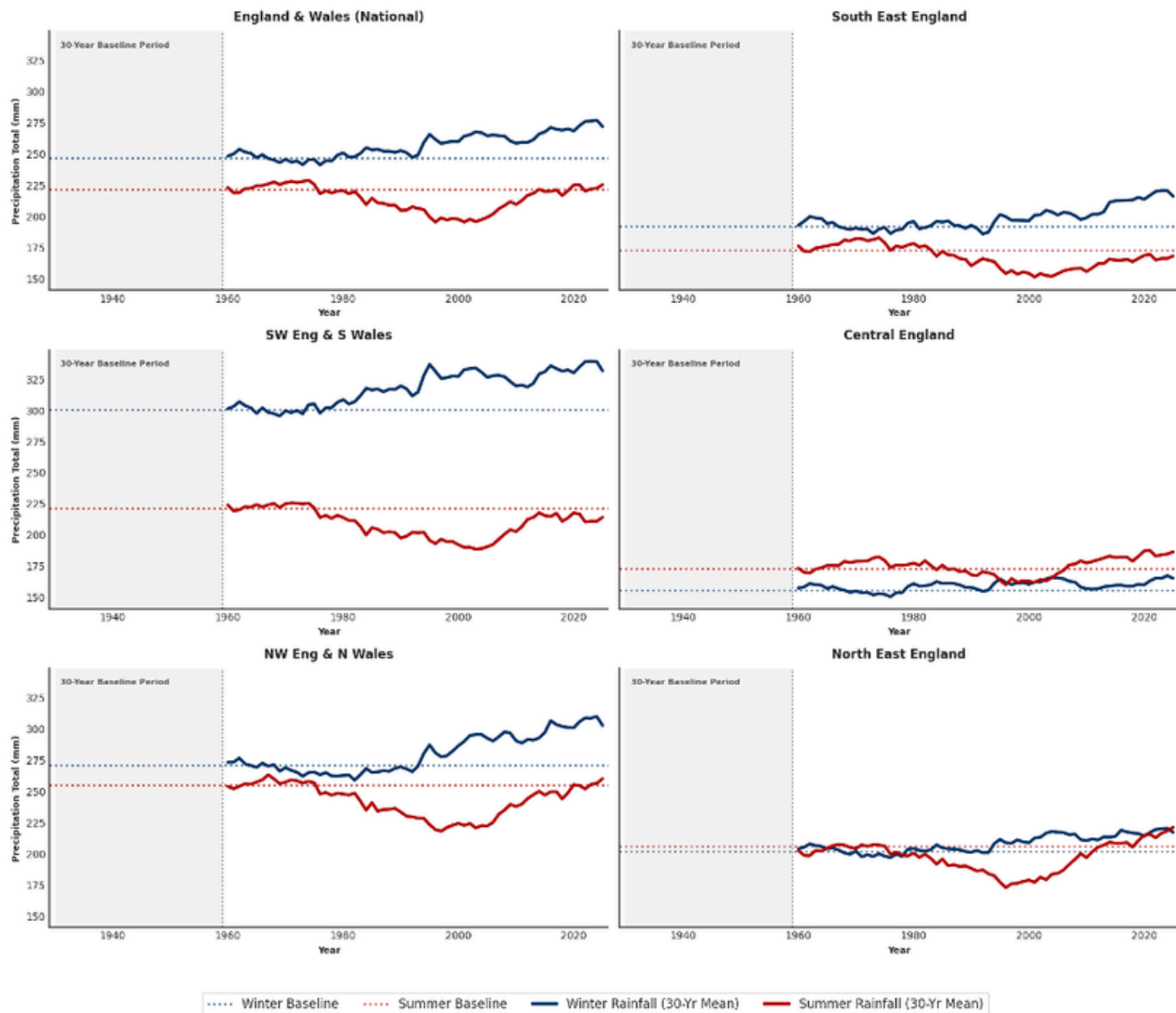


Figure 1: England and Wales summer and winter precipitation change (30-year rolling average from 1930–1959 baseline)

When comparing changes in summer and winter precipitation across regions of England and Wales (as defined by the Met Office HadUKP), relative to a 30-year baseline period between 1930–1959, we can more clearly see how seasonal precipitation trends have changed (Met Office, 2026b):

- Total winter precipitation has increased across every region, whereas summer rainfall remains relatively similar to what it was in the baseline period.
- Between the 1980s and late 2000s, summer rainfall did decrease.
- Since the 2010s summer rain has been increasing and in some cases, returning towards or above the historical baseline level of 100 years ago.

If drought declarations are increasing despite more winter and summer rainfall in recent times, this points to structural issues such as insufficient storage and infrastructure, rather than a climate-driven reduction in total water supply.

Understanding how precipitation affects water supply in England and Wales is not simply a case of how much rain is falling each year, although it is an important component.

More rainfall means a greater overall supply, but when and how this rain falls is just as important. The number of continuous dry days is an important factor to consider.

Consecutive dry days

Extended periods of consecutive dry days severely disrupt the natural replenishment of water resources. As rainfall ceases for prolonged stretches, soils dry out and harden, significantly reducing their permeability (Dunne & Black, 1970). When precipitation eventually returns, the baked ground cannot absorb the water efficiently, leading to rapid surface runoff rather than the slow, sustained percolation required to recharge vital groundwater aquifers.

Furthermore, without regular rainfall to maintain baseline river levels, flows drop drastically, reducing the system's ability to dilute pollutants from sewage and agricultural runoff, and reducing the habitat available to aquatic animals.

This acute lack of natural replenishment often leads to water companies relying on drought permits/orders to extract water from already degraded and ecologically stressed freshwater environments.



Howden Reservoir, Linch Clough, July 2026. ©WildFish

Table 2: Net change in cumulative dry spells (5+ days with less than 0.2mm of rain) between April and September for 1930–1959 and 1996–2025

Region	1930–1959 (Days)	1996–2025 (Days)	Net Change
England & Wales (National)	726	698	-3.9%
South East England	1503	1592	5.9%
SW Eng & S Wales	1017	1044	2.7%
Central England	1172	1309	11.7%
NW Eng & N Wales	958	862	-10.0%
North East England	740	1003	35.5%

* Defined as consecutive dry spells of 5 or more days with <0.2mm daily rainfall.

Analysis of dry spell severity breakdown for the warm half-year (April–September) reveals distinct regional shifts in drought exposure, driven primarily by an increase in shorter, moderate dry spells (Table 2).

While the national average suggests a slight overall decrease in total dry days (-3.9%), this masks significant regional volatility. North East England experienced the most dramatic escalation, with total cumulative dry days rising by +35.5% alongside a massive +149.1% increase in “Absolute Drought” events (15+ days) compared to the 1930–1959 baseline period (Fig 2). Regions like the South East and Central England saw more modest increases in total dry days (+5.9% and +11.7%, respectively), these were driven by a proliferation of moderate (5–9 days) and long (10–14 days) spells, even as their occurrences of absolute drought declined.

This indicates that the nature of water scarcity in England is shifting toward more frequent, disruptive dry intervals, rather than solely being defined by prolonged, multi-week droughts (additional breakdown in Appendix A).

Figure 2 also shows that the current decade (2020s) is already experiencing an exceptional number of consecutive dry days across all regions compared to recent decades, despite only being halfway through (up to and including 2025).

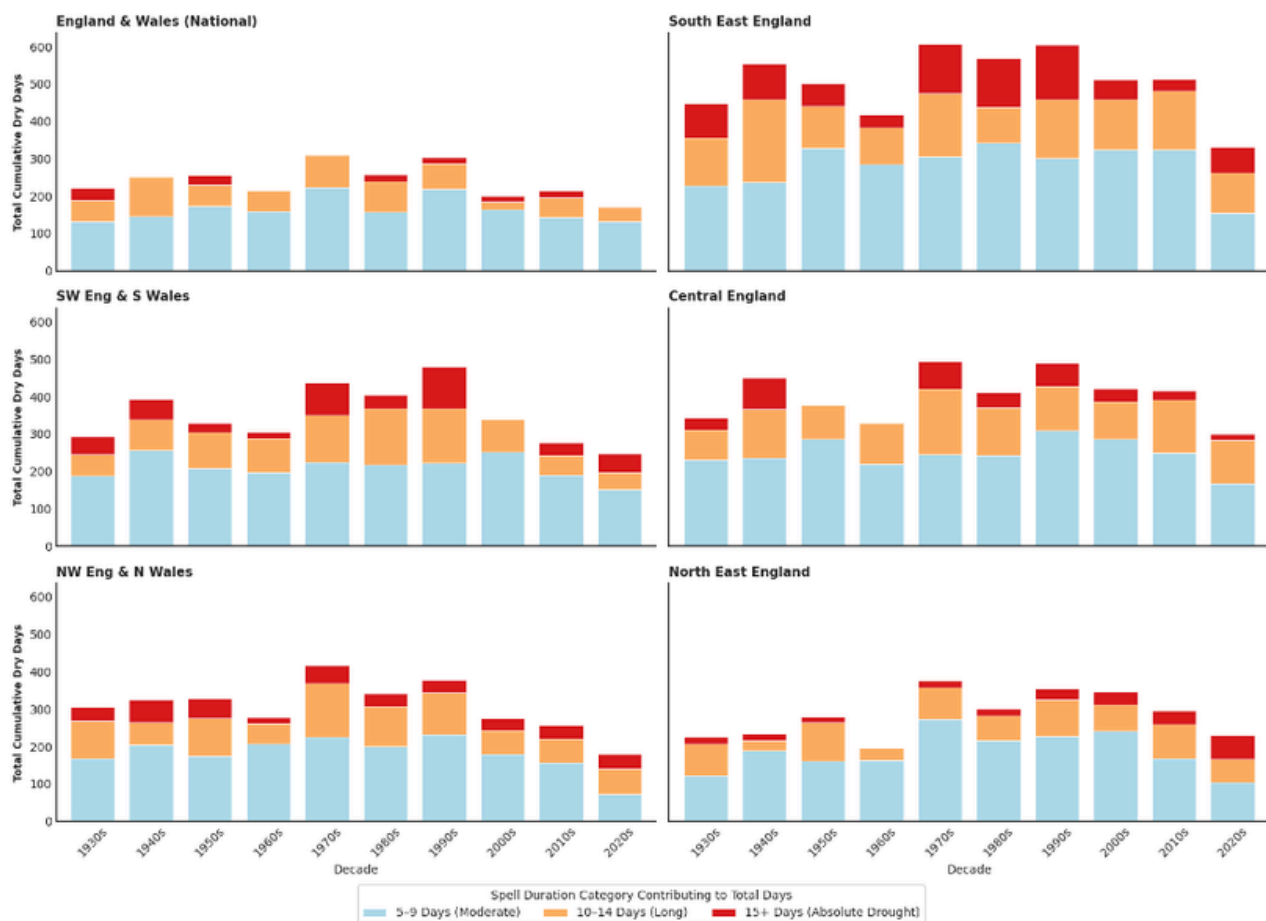


Figure 2: Decadal cumulative dry spells (5+days) during warm half year (Apr–Sept) for England and Wales (1931–2025) Met Office HadUKP daily dataset (<0.2mm threshold)

One final component of precipitation to consider for water supply is the intensity of falling rainfall.

Rainfall intensity

Climate modelling for the UK suggests that rainfall events will become less frequent but more intense in the future (Hanlon et al, 2021).

This will mean more precipitation will be lost to runoff (either by rapid soil saturation or impermeability from prolonged dry weather), rather than percolating into soils and recharging groundwater aquifers.



Heavy rainfall in West Sussex.

Table 3: Summer (Jun–Aug) rainfall intensity shifts (1931–1960 vs 1996–2025). Heavy (top 5%) and Extreme (top 1%)

Region	Heavy Days (Base → Modern)	Heavy Shift	Extreme Days (Base → Modern)	Extreme Shift
England & Wales	1.93 → 1.83	–5.2%	0.50 → 0.83	66.7%
South East England	1.37 → 1.40	2.4%	0.37 → 0.33	–9.1%
SW Eng & S Wales	1.70 → 1.67	–2.0%	0.43 → 0.53	23.1%
Central England	1.47 → 1.67	13.6%	0.40 → 0.47	16.7%
NW Eng & N Wales	1.87 → 2.47	32.1%	0.50 → 0.40	–20.0%
North East England	1.67 → 2.07	24.0%	0.43 → 0.67	53.8%

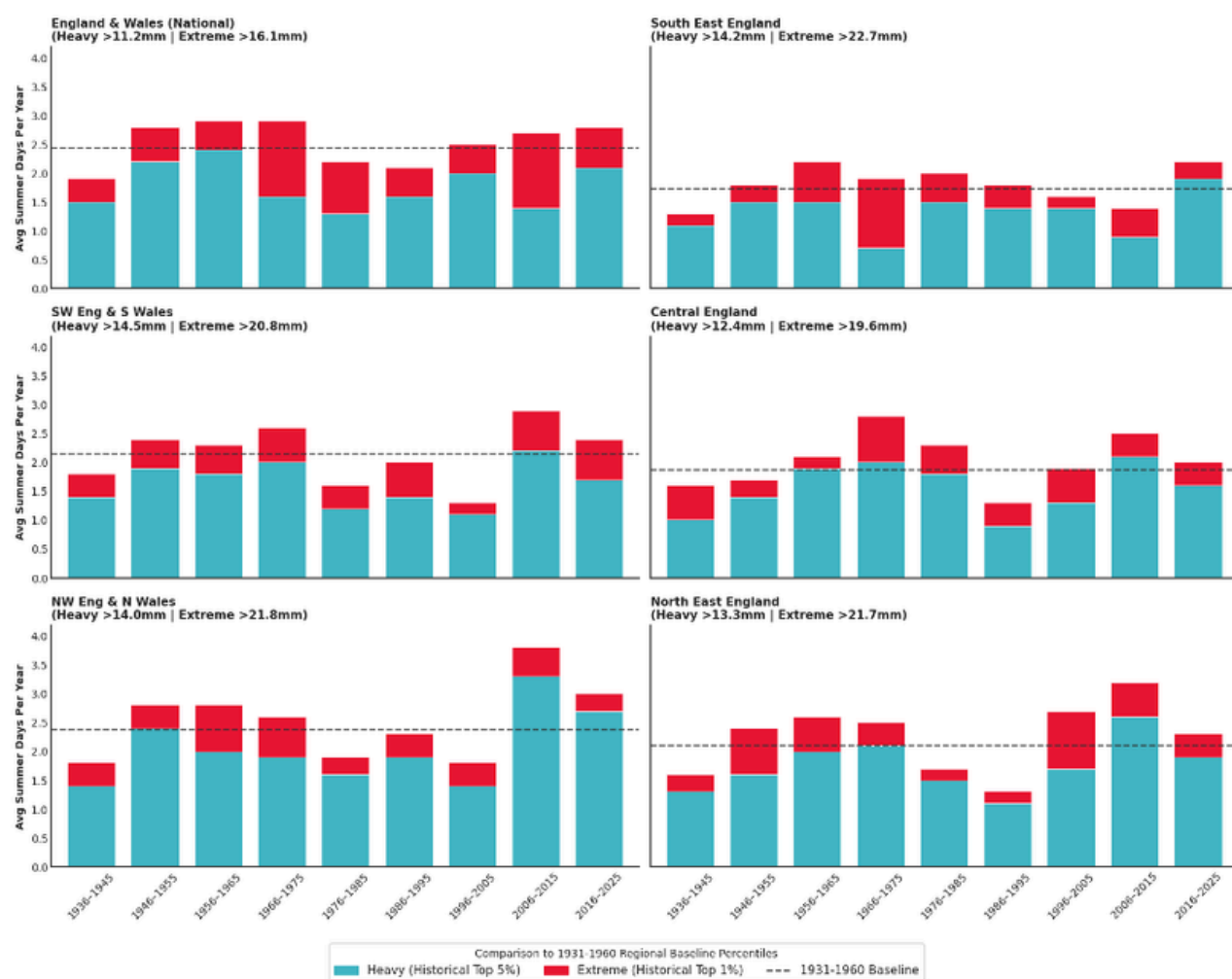


Figure 3: Summer (Jun–Aug) decadal shift in top 5% and top 1% extreme rainfall events (1931–2025) against 1931–1960 historical baseline

Analysis of summer extreme rainfall shifts between the historical baseline (1931–1960) and the modern era (1996–2025) shows a transition toward higher-intensity, lower-utility precipitation (Fig 3). Rather than applying a national threshold, region-specific definitions of "Heavy" (top 5% of wet days) and "Extreme" (top 1% of wet days) were established based on the regional 1931–1960 baselines.

Across England and Wales as a whole, while the frequency of heavy summer rain days (exceeding 11.2mm) has slightly decreased by 5.2%, the occurrence of extreme downpours (exceeding 16.1mm) has surged by 66.7%. This volatility is also seen regionally (Table 3). North East England has experienced increases in both heavy (>13.3mm) and extreme (>21.7mm) rainfall events, rising by +24.0% and +53.8% respectively. Central England has also seen significant simultaneous increases across both intensity categories (+13.6% Heavy, +16.7% Extreme). Other regions have seen declines in one of either heavy or extreme days, but increases in the other.

South East England, often considered the country's most water-stressed region, diverges from the national trend of increasing intense rainfall days. While the national average saw a +66.7% surge in "extreme" rain days, the South East experienced a 9.1% decrease. Instead, its vulnerability is driven by chronic dry periods. The region suffers the highest absolute number of cumulative dry days (1,592 days between 1996–2025), a 5.9% overall increase (Fig 2, Table 2). This rise is fuelled by a 22.8% increase in moderate (5–9 day) dry spells, creating a pattern of continuous aquifer drawdown without periods of sustained rainfall needed for natural recharge.

As illustrated by the decadal tracking charts (Fig 3), modern summer rainfall frequently spikes well above the 1931–1960 baseline, but summer rains are becoming more concentrated, intense bursts rather than steady rain.

HOW DOES 2026 FARE?

Are we looking at a typical year exposed by infrastructure deficits?

The recent drought of 2026 has seen wide coverage across the media. We have experienced the driest July on record for both England and Wales in a series stretching back 190 years to 1836, naturally drawing comparisons to the infamous drought of 1976. In England, just 6.5 mm of rainfall was recorded, representing only 10% of its long-term average for the month. Southern England was even more severely affected, receiving a mere 1.9 mm (3% of average).

However, when analysing the better part of the last century for precipitation, it reveals that 2026 is not quite an exceptional year for lack of total cumulative rainfall, so far (Figure 4). The graphs below present cumulative monthly precipitation (mm) for six regions of England and Wales.

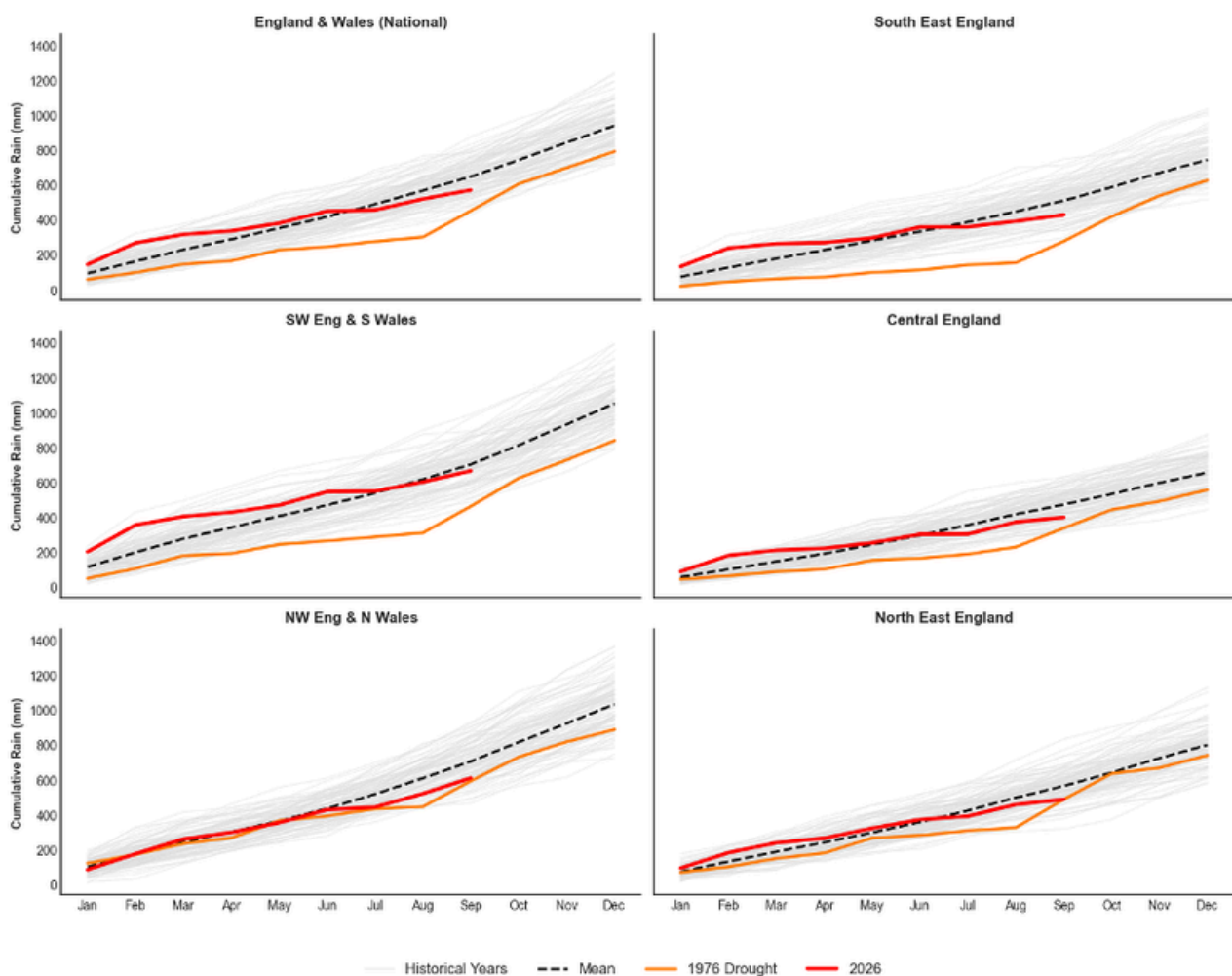


Figure 4: National and regional cumulative monthly rainfall (mm) (1931-2026)

Despite July 2026 recording the lowest monthly total on record for England and Wales, the cumulative trajectory for the year remained firmly clustered around the long-term central mean across all regions. Through June, cumulative precipitation was above average nationally (for example, tracking near 450mm against a 430mm mean), offsetting some of the subsequent July deficit. However, as the dry conditions have continued into September (and now even October), regions such as the NE and NW and N Wales are now seeing total cumulative rainfall similar to 1976, although these regions were less effected by the historical drought than central and southern regions. The southern and central regions are still tracking on or slightly below their annual averages (Fig 4).

The 1976 drought demonstrates a markedly extreme hydrological profile: cumulative totals tracked well below the mean from January onwards (and continued from drought conditions the previous year). It was a sustained, multi-season deficit that gave water resources no opportunity to recharge over multiple seasons. By contrast, 2026's trajectory largely follows the central, 100-year distribution, with the summer anomalies an extreme deviation rather than part of a prolonged, structural drought signature. As precipitation has been high throughout the early part of the year, we should be less likely to see the deep, year-round baseline deficits experienced in 1976, especially with the coming El Niño conditions.

Single-month extremes, while highly disruptive to agriculture and surface environments, are not indicative of an annual water resource deficit when considered in a cumulative context.

With adequate, modernised storage capable of capturing the wetter winter and transition seasons, a single dry summer month should not push the country so readily into drought. Yet even rainfall typical of the past century is now affecting reservoir storage, groundwater recharge and river flow across large parts of England and Wales. In 2026, high temperatures combined with just one or two atypical months were enough to critically stress supply, even in an above-average precipitation year. (Fig. 5).



Figure 5: Images showing reduction of water resources at Howden Reservoir, Derbyshire over a six-month period in 2026. A: January B: June

MAIN DATA TAKEAWAYS

England remains one of the more water-stressed countries in Europe.

Around 94% of the population depend on surface water and groundwater sources, while much of the country's future housing is planned in the South East, East of England, and other regions where water resources are naturally limited and population density is high (GOV.UK, 2022).

We are not running out of rain.

This analysis of England and Wales's precipitation over the past 100 years challenges the narrative that water scarcity is primarily a symptom of climate-driven summer rainfall reduction. When looking back on how climate has already changed, the perception of "wetter winters and drier summers" is inaccurate. However, this may change in the future, as many UK climate predictions suggest we will see drier summers in the latter part of the 21st century (Met Office, 2026a). While winter rainfall has indeed increased, summer precipitation has returned to, and in some regions exceeded, historical mid-century baselines.

Shifting rainfall intensity and annual distribution is of more pressing concern than total rainfall.

The data shows a transition toward shorter but more frequent dry spells punctuated by more intense downpours in most regions. When rain arrives in concentrated deluges, especially when soils are dry and impermeable, it rapidly washes away as surface runoff without meaningfully recharging vital aquifers and reservoirs.

A sustained, multi-season drought of 1976 magnitude would push England's water system entirely past its breaking point.

While the 1976 crisis was severe, today the structural gap between available capture capacity and rising demand has stretched the system to its limit.

This climatic shift exposes a massive infrastructure deficit.

England has not completed a major new reservoir since 1992, despite a 20% increase in population and soaring demand (ONS, 2025). We are currently attempting to manage twenty-first-century extremes with infrastructure designed for the twentieth century.

If the nation is already reliant on environmentally damaging drought permits/orders during periods of average or above-average annual and summer rainfall, the system is demonstrably broken. As climate change continues to intensify these cycles of acute drought and extreme deluge, the structural gap between available capture capacity and rising demand will only widen without large investments in our water infrastructure.

Since the publication of the first edition of this report, water companies have adopted their Water Resources Management Plans (WRMP24), setting out long-term investment programmes extending to 2050 and beyond. These plans include proposals for new reservoirs, strategic water transfers, desalination plants, water recycling schemes, leakage reduction, smart metering and demand management (Environment Agency, 2025).

Collectively, these represent the largest programme of water resource investment in England for more than three decades. However, most strategic supply schemes remain in planning, design or regulatory approval stage. Very few are yet capable of providing additional resilience during prolonged drought. Consequently, England continues to rely largely on infrastructure designed for a twentieth-century climate while attempting to manage twenty-first-century extremes.

Action required

The solutions are well understood (Shemer et al., 2023). New reservoirs, water recycling, strategic transfers, leakage reduction, universal smart metering, catchment restoration and stronger water efficiency standards must all be delivered together rather than in isolation (Tate, 2000).

Abstraction from stressed rivers should remain a genuine last resort rather than becoming an increasingly routine feature of drought management. A resilient water supply system should be capable of maintaining secure public water supplies without placing additional pressure on rivers, especially when they are least able to withstand it. Protecting freshwater ecosystems must therefore be recognised as a central component of long-term water security, not a constraint upon it.

England has not completed a major new reservoir since 1992, despite a 20% increase in population and soaring demand.

(ONS, 2025)

From the Government, regulators and the water industry, we need:

Faster delivery of reservoirs, water recycling, strategic transfers and other nationally significant water supply infrastructure.

Much greater capacity to capture and store rainfall when it is available.

An end to routine dependence on drought permits as a substitute for long-term investment.

Stronger legal protection for environmental flows in rivers, particularly internationally important chalk streams and designated habitats.

Greater transparency in Water Resources Management Plans, including clear reporting of supply deficits, abstraction assumptions and environmental risks.

Integration of water resource planning with spatial planning to ensure that new development occurs only where sustainable water supplies can be secured.

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APPENDIX A

30-Year Era Comparison: Dry Spell Severity Breakdown (Apr-Sep)

Region	Category	1930-1959 (Days)	1996-2025 (Days)	Net Change
England & Wales (National)	Total Cumulative Dry Days	726	698	-3.9%
	- 5-9 Days (Moderate)	450	529	+17.6%
	- 10-14 Days (Long)	219	135	-38.4%
	- 15+ Days (Absolute Drought)	57	34	-40.4%
South East England	Total Cumulative Dry Days	1503	1592	+5.9%
	- 5-9 Days (Moderate)	793	974	+22.8%
	- 10-14 Days (Long)	461	449	-2.6%
	- 15+ Days (Absolute Drought)	249	169	-32.1%
SW Eng & S Wales	Total Cumulative Dry Days	1017	1044	+2.7%
	- 5-9 Days (Moderate)	654	687	+5.0%
	- 10-14 Days (Long)	233	230	-1.3%
	- 15+ Days (Absolute Drought)	130	127	-2.3%
Central England	Total Cumulative Dry Days	1172	1309	+11.7%
	- 5-9 Days (Moderate)	751	801	+6.7%
	- 10-14 Days (Long)	303	433	+42.9%
	- 15+ Days (Absolute Drought)	118	75	-36.4%
NW Eng & N Wales	Total Cumulative Dry Days	958	862	-10.0%
	- 5-9 Days (Moderate)	547	524	-4.2%
	- 10-14 Days (Long)	261	231	-11.5%
	- 15+ Days (Absolute Drought)	150	107	-28.7%
North East England	Total Cumulative Dry Days	740	1003	+35.5%
	- 5-9 Days (Moderate)	474	603	+27.2%
	- 10-14 Days (Long)	211	263	+24.6%
	- 15+ Days (Absolute Drought)	55	137	+149.1%

* Defined as consecutive dry spells of 5 or more days with <0.2mm daily rainfall. 'New Hazard' indicates no occurrence in the baseline era.

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