Cambridge Water

South Staffs Water

To help create a world where essential services and infrastructure deliver for customers, clients and our planet

South Staffs Water 2025 Drought Review

March 2026

South Staffordshire Water PLC

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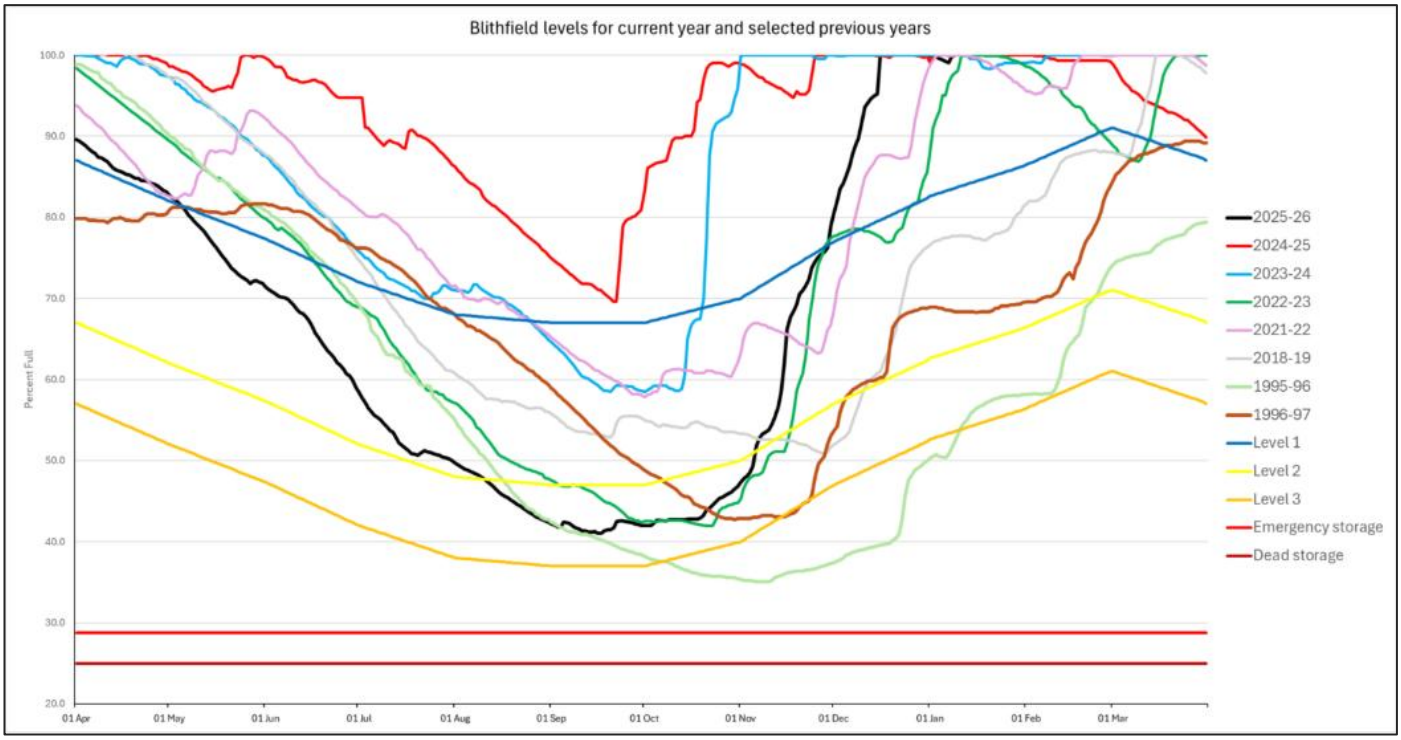
Overview

The spring of 2025 was the driest on record, and the summer was the hottest on record (Met Office). These factors had a significant impact on South Staffs Water (SST), as demand rose and we saw Blithfield Reservoir levels dropping due to reduced inflows and higher SMD.

Figure1. Blithfield Levels Graph, including 2025 and selected years



Following low rainfall of 24.6% LTA in March, the level of Blithfield began dropping in spring. This drop started one month earlier than we would typically see, and this trend continued into summer. With low inflows and the level of the River Blithe at North Muskham being below the HOF of 2650Ml/d, there was no opportunity to turn the Nethertown pumpback on.

The lowest level seen at Blithfield during the 2025 drought was 41% which occurred on the 17th of September. This was lower than the drought of 2022 (when the lowest point was 41.92%) and is second only to the level seen in 1995 when it got to 35.04%.

Demand for the entirety of 2025 was above our 5-year average figures, peaking in June when we hit 396 Ml/d (Figure 2). The sharp rise in demand during the long dry period between April and September put pressure on Blithfield and the River Severn as the largest sources of raw water in the SST supply zone.

Rainfall was below the long-term average from January until mid-August (Figure 3), causing river flows to be lower. During 2025 there were 87 days when the flows in the River Blithe at North Muskham were below the HOF of 2,650 Ml/d, leading to the Nethertown pumpback not being able to be used for a large part of the peak period. This

pumpback system allows us to pump water directly from the River Blithe into the Reservoir and provides a benefit of up to 24 Ml/d, although can go as high as 30 Ml/d in some conditions as tested during 2025. This helps us to keep levels ideally stable, or prevent them from dropping too quickly.

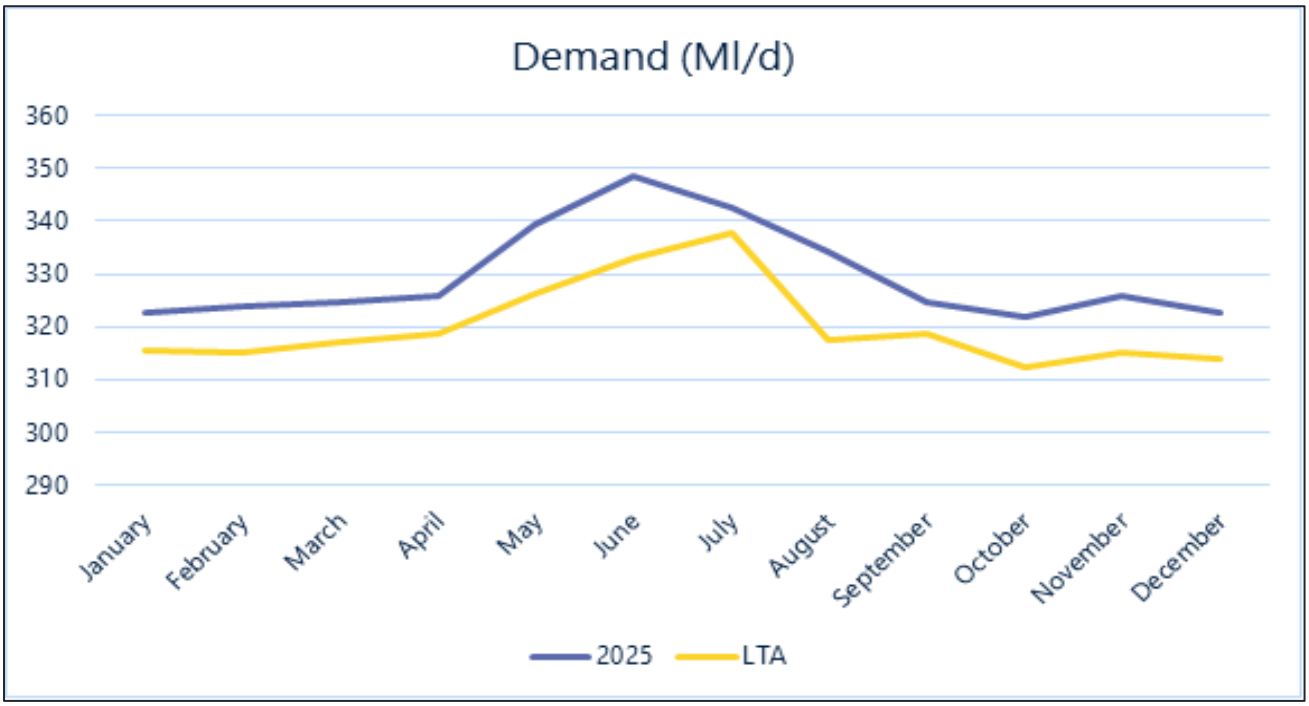


Figure 2. Demand figures for the SST supply region

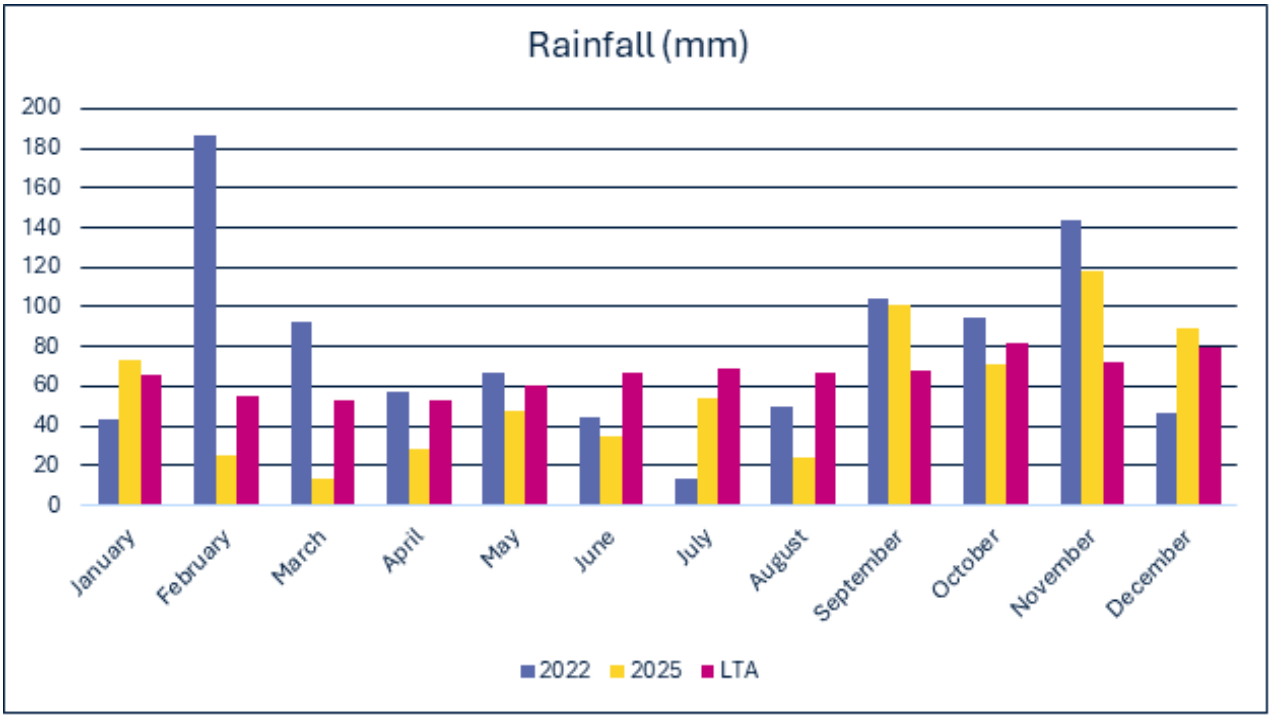


Figure 3. Rainfall statistics for 2022, 2025 and the Long-Term Average

River Severn Regulation

River Severn Regulation started on the 9th of May and continued until the 11th of September, with 86 regulation days during the period. River Severn Regulation puts additional conditions on abstraction for our Hampton Loade surface water treatment works during the regulation period. Its aim is to maintain steady natural flows in the River Severn for ecological conservation and the health of the river system, by reducing the level of abstraction from the River Severn through the period of river regulation and high demand. To meet the total volume allowed during the 100 day regulation period, the daily targeted abstraction for the surface water treatment works during a period of River Regulation is 192 Ml, this is lower than maximum daily limit of 220 Ml. We can balance this as required throughout the 100 day period, as the regulation is only on the overall volume abstracted.

During 2025 we were required to balance the outputs from our two surface water treatment works, one on the River Severn (which is restricted by River Severn Regulation) and one downstream of Blithfield, to strategically meet the demand of the SST supply zone.

Response

In 2025, as Blithfield started to drop we took actions laid out in the drought plan to reduce the amount of raw water being drawn from Blithfield. Our actions for each level are outlined in Figure 4. Note, action 6 and action 12 are crossed out as the potable infusion option has been removed due to feasibility since the publication of the drought plan through discussions with the EA.

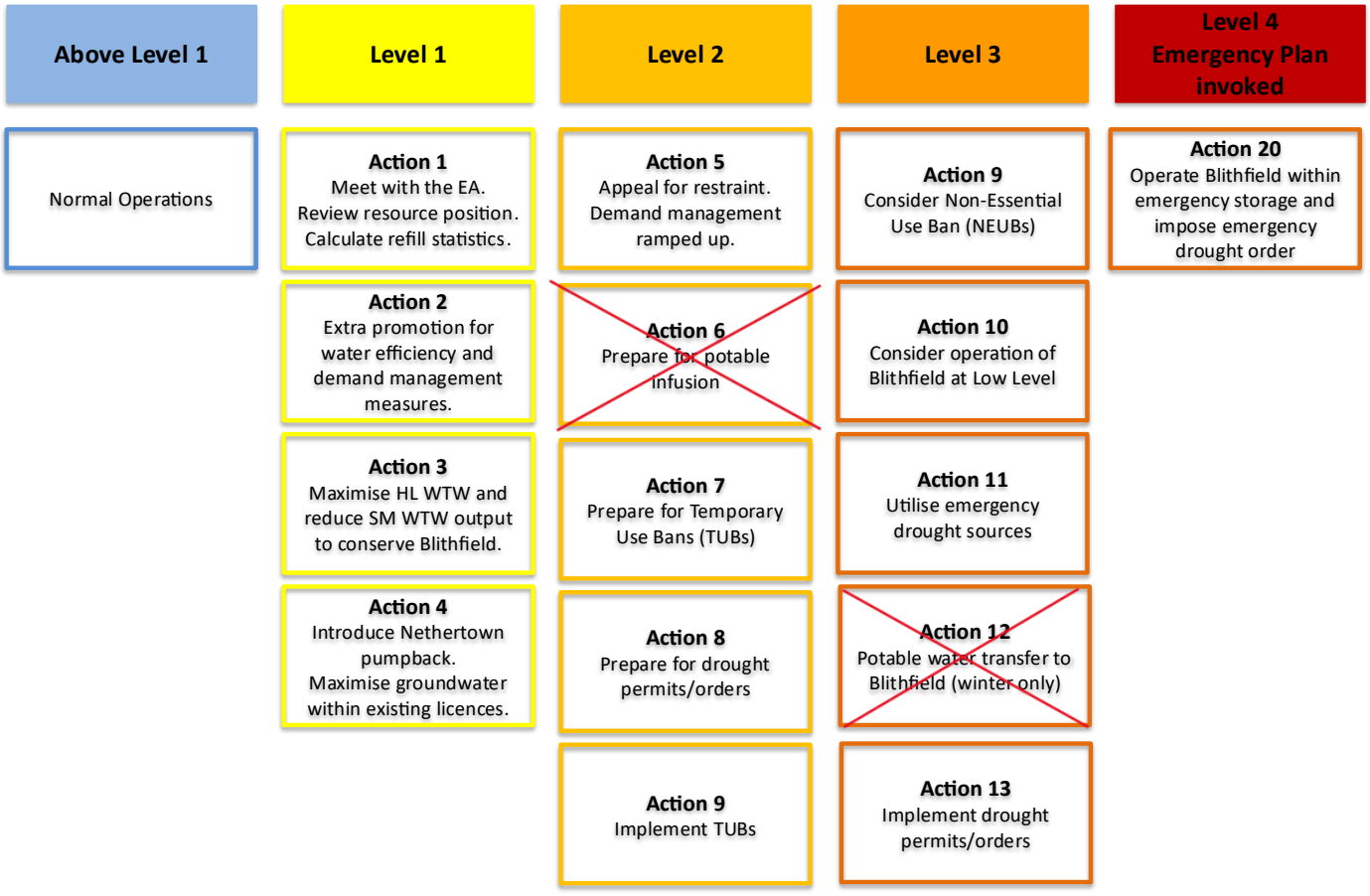


Figure 4. The Level chart detailed in the Drought Plan, including corresponding actions

The level of the Blithfield Reservoir is taken daily and during business as usual it is updated on a graph weekly. As we saw the level decreasing through spring the weekly internal Blithfield Conservation meetings were initiated in March; this is standard procedure when the level nears Drought Plan Level 1. These meetings followed a set agenda covering Blithfield levels and weather updates, outage status, and communications with customers. Appropriate actions were identified and progress was tracked through this group.

We initiated the Nethertown pumpback on the 13th of March, in anticipation of dropping levels, but crossed into Level 1 on 5th May. After levels dropped into Level 1 we focused on created actions which would bring more water into supply from out of service assets, reducing demand and operational performance.

As well as the current Blithfield level we discussed projections for future levels based on historic inflows and abstraction levels. These projections had two different scenarios, one where the Nethertown pumpback was in operation, one where it was not. This helped to inform where we would be in the coming weeks and months, and plan accordingly.

As per our drought plan actions, we temporarily halted on any planned outages and focussed on return to service plans for any unplanned site outages.

To ensure on-going transparency with our regulator, the output from this weekly meeting was shared in a slide pack format with local and regional representatives from the Environment Agency on a weekly basis, through both a meeting to discuss and as an email to a wider group of EA colleagues.

When levels were approaching the Level 2 trigger curve, began preparations for both a potential temporary use ban (TUB) and a drought permit, if they were to be required later in the year. This was earlier than the drought plan action. This was to ensure we could implement a TUB rapidly if required. A full and comprehensive TUB implementation plan and pack was developed available for deployment immediately. Blithfield crossed into Level 2 on 10th August prompting the Level 2 action to consider a TUB.

As this was relatively late in the summer, we undertook rainfall and reservoir inflow modelling which looked at demand and historic inflow trends. This modelling demonstrated that implementing a TUB would provide an 11-day benefit before the drought curve would be expected to cross back into Level 1. Following the TUB implementation process and timescales including allowance for advertising and to allow representations the earliest date a TUB would have come into effect would have been the end of August. Given the time of year, the board decided that the inconvenience to customers did not outweigh the minimal benefit a TUB would buy.

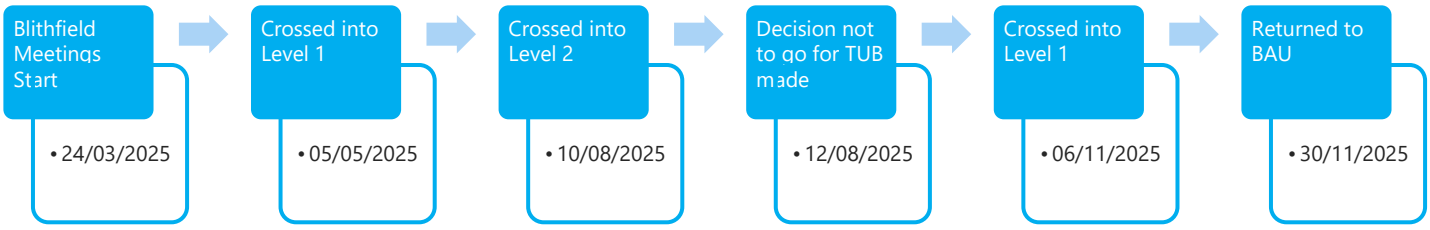


Figure 5. Timeline of Levels crossed within the Drought Plan.

Communication

Communication with customers

We communicated with our customers through a range of methods: direct emailing, social media posts, video messaging, radio interviews, and sponsored radio advertisements. We gathered learnings from each of these methods, which are outlined below.

The timeliness of the communication with our customers has been suggested by the Environment Agency as an area for improvement. The updates sent to customers could have been sent out earlier in the year to highlight water saving strategies, and therefore customers would have been more prepared in summer when the messaging ramped up in urgency.

During our review of the drought of 2022 we highlighted the need for convenient 'off the shelf' water saving and drought information packages that could be rolled out to customers across our region. The communications strategy we currently have worked well, however comms were being developed as required rather than being prewritten and ready to go. The updated comms plan in the next Drought Plan will provide further detail on this.

Our email communication to customers can be either a service email, which can go to all customers we have email addresses for, or a marketing email which customers can opt out for. During 2025 there was a delay whilst we sought advice to confirm whether the emails outlining our current position, including water saving strategies and tips on efficiency were deemed as marketing. This limited us earlier in the year as the dry weather extended to only contacting those customers who had agreed to marketing information. We have now agreed that current water resources situation falls under service update and can be sent to all customers.

Monitoring the open rate of our email engagement, this ranged between 47-61%, meaning 93k-182k customers opened the emails. The email titled "Our water resources are under pressure 💧" received the most opens, which indicates an urgent tone invites engagement. During the later emails, we included a link for customers to feedback their thoughts on our engagement. We received a range of responses but many customers who responded found the contents of emails either excellent or good, see figure 5 below.

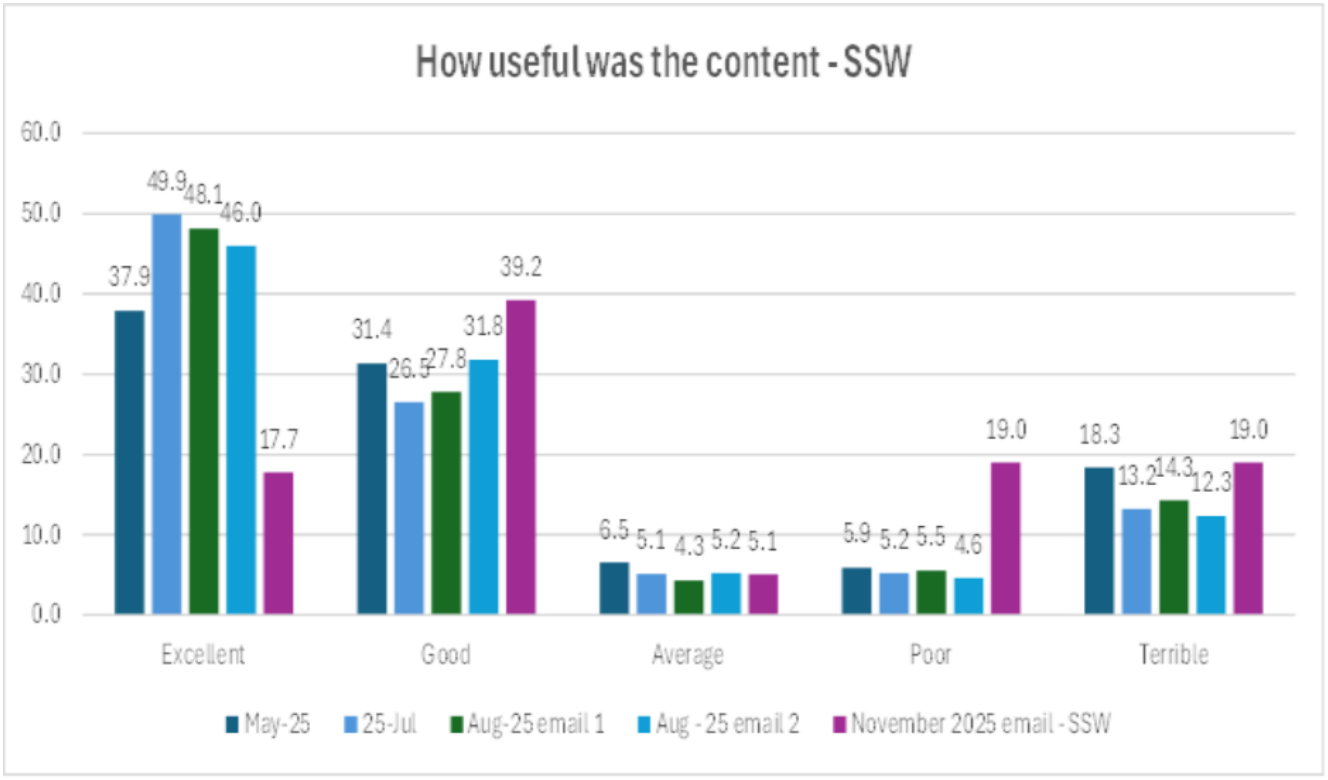


Figure 5. Feedback on content of water efficiency emails

We have taken some key takeaways from the feedback following our email campaigns, these include:

- Ensure we have up to date FAQ with responses to the main challenges being raised by customers.
- Enhance our communication about work with NHH customers to encourage their reduced demand.
- Tailor communication with customers on the PSR register.
- Provide more visuals and videos to engage those that prefer that communication style.

We continue looking at how to connect to more customers through different media forms, other than email. This year we sponsored the weather segment on the Global Radio Network for eight weeks, commencing on the 14th of July, which reached more than a million people. We also sponsored our posts on Facebook and Instagram to target areas. Posts were in a range of styles such as one-off photos and key messages, digital stories and video messages from staff. We did a series of three boosted posts that followed the journey of "what we are doing" about leaks, "how customers can use water wisely" and "how we monitor our supplies". On average, these three posts reached 202,324.

In November we ran a water butt competition through Facebook and promoted via emails to raises awareness of water usage, this was hugely successful with over 700 entrants.

As using emails and text messages are both relatively easy and effective means of directly contacting customers, our customer and communication team are seeking to increase and maximise the coverage of this information over the customer base. To increase our coverage, we need to encourage more customers to set up online accounts, this is a question our call agents ask all contacts, as well as it being something we will be promote during annual billing.

In December we sent an email to our customers outlining that water resources were back to a stable level, but to still encourage using water wisely and mostly, to thank them for their efforts over summer. We felt this was an important step in acknowledging the support customers gave through a difficult summer period, however in hindsight we feel we should have shared this message earlier in the autumn.

We put significant effort in engaging with our customers throughout the drought period, however, we are mindful that as a region we have 10% of customers where English is not their first language and may be missing a segment of engagement. Following the insights gained from last summer's drought campaign, we are exploring how offering communications in additional languages can help us reach and support a wider range of communities more effectively.

Communication with the Environment Agency and other stakeholders

Environment Agency

We regularly engage with the Environment Agency throughout the year, and we increased this during the drought period in 2025. We participated in meetings to discuss drought at all levels with varying frequency. The most regular meeting was a weekly meeting with local EA team members, followed by a weekly summary email to a wider distribution list. Additionally, there were monthly meetings with the EA water resources leads, bi-monthly EA/SSW director level meetings and CEO/EA meetings. We also attended the EA's National Drought Group meetings, which were held monthly, a separate CEO level NDG meeting and EA lead River Regulation meetings.

A proposal would be to look at a cascade system, where there are fewer meetings with fewer attendees, but there is an easy to circulate information and notes pack. This was raised after the drought of 2022, and although it seems steps were taken reduce information being repeated (including broadening the circulation of the Water Resources weekly update email). This would require support from the Environment Agency and agreement at all levels, but there are still some improvements here which could be made to improve the relationship between the Environment Agency and South Staffs Water.

We received feedback from the Environment Agency that we did not share enough information on our planning of the River Severn Regulations. Regular monitoring was happening internally and therefore our aim is to go further into depth with our River Regulation response with the Environment Agency going forward. When the regulation comes into effect, we will provide more detail than we have previously once we reach an appropriate point within the 100 days.

Following on from the recommendations raised in the National Drought Group after the 2022 drought we had regular communications with NAVs and Severn Trent (our neighbouring water provider) to ensure that our messaging was aligned.

WRW

Drought is discussed at the monthly Water Resource West meetings, attended by all water companies in the region and additional stakeholders such as the EA, Natural England, Canals and Rivers Trust, NFU, as well as some NAVs. Since the 2025 drought WRW have completed a "lessons learned", some recommendations were:

1. Start WRW drought coordination earlier in an event.
2. WRW to act as a promoter and cascade for individual member communications.
3. Facilitation of forecasting meetings between wholesalers, retailers and NAVs.
4. Consider better way of cascading information, rather than repetition of same points by multiple participants in a meeting.
5. Consider whether join-up messaging across sectors would be beneficial.
6. Understand the needs and engagement requirements of other sectors.

Retailers

As well as regular meetings with our regulators, we also attended a monthly retailer's group to outline our current situation. We shared regular updates with our Retailers on our water resources situation, asking for their support in communicating the message to their customers to encourage using water wisely.

Internal communications

We had strong internal management of the drought, with two tiers of response at a tactical and executive level. This enabled clear process for internal discussion and a strong evidence base for decision-making. The tactical Blithfield Conservation meetings ran weekly, with regular Teams updates in between. With the executive level incident team meeting daily during the latter stages of Level 1 and into Level 2, for high level updates and quick decision making. This frequency reduced as the Blithfield levels recovered before being stood down once comfortably within business as usual levels.

The executive level meeting was run as an incident mode, with clear documentation of all discussions, decisions and actions. This was a step change from the previous drought of 2022, providing additional assurance and accountability for actions taken.

During the Blithfield Conservation meetings information and updates included Blithfield levels and North Muskham river flows, River Severn Regulation updates, outage status and return to service progress, and other operational updates such as water quality risks. This helped to keep the group informed mid-week as levels can change quickly and discuss the potential of operating the Nethertown pumpback. We identified that it would be beneficial for a leakage representative to be included in the meetings in future, to aid the collection of relevant demand data and updates on drought actions taken.

Another area of improvement identified was streamlining the internal River Severn Regulation strategy. As we progressed through the regulation season the position was being reviewed daily. There were several scenarios being reviewed and ownership for internal communication on these was not clear. This needs more focus within the Blithfield Conservation meetings, as surface water management across our region impacts the Blithfield levels.

We have committed to creating a procedure and policy documentation about how to manage our abstractions through the 100 days of River Regulation, as this will make the process smoother provide clarity on our approach to the EA.

Internal Processes

Outage

We learned from the 2025 drought how important it is to ensure we focus on having all sites in operation early spring. We had several sites out on long term outage (both CID and WQ), which impacted our water available. Now our focus is on ensuring maximum site availability for 1st April each year, ready for spring and demand to ramp up.

Ownership and monitoring of planned outage has also changed, with us proactively reporting to Environment Agency.

Nethertown

The Nethertown pumpback could have been switched on earlier in the season, as soon as the level in Blithfield started dropping, as there was a high enough flow in the Blithe and Trent to enable this. Learning from this we are reviewing our operating philosophy, so that we now use Nethertown in spring once level drops below 100% and run it constantly, either until 100% full or until we are unable to utilise it due to the river flows.

We aim to keep the level as high as possible for as long as possible, and push draw down further into the year. This way we will better preserve the level.

Historically we have only been able to achieve a return of 24 Ml/d when the pumpback is available. During 2025 we adjusted a valve complex to allow us to use a larger main to return water into Blithfield. This enabled us to get up to 30 Ml/d on a temporary basis. This maximised our return into Blithfield, utilising the river flows while they were above the HOF.

Hampton Loade Treatment Works

Hampton Loade Treatment Works was on reduced flows going into the spring of 2025, as we were commissioning a new ceramic plant and therefore, due to balancing abstraction levels, the Blithfield level hit Level 1 earlier in the season than normal.

The level of long term BH outage early in the season meant we were unable to drop flows and preserve the level. We responded well to this and worked to get sites back into operation. This allowed us to reduce abstraction from Blithfield later in the season but raised the lesson that we need to ensure we have maximum availability in spring to make sure this situation is not repeated. This will be supported by the new Nethertown pumpback strategy and help us to maintain levels at Blithfield.

We need to strategize the planning of planned outage at large sites, so that they will not have an impact on the spring and summer availability. A review will take place which will devise a way in which we can manage this timetable considering spring/summer demand.

Brindley Bank

Bringing Brindley Bank back into service took longer than we would have liked, not returning to service until mid August, as it needed capital works. This site only provides a small flow but as part of our drought plan we need to ensure it is available as soon as it is needed.

To prevent this in future we this site will be reviewed each March to understand if there is any work needed to make it available for use. This action has been raised for the Production department and will help to keep this site in supply as we will have time to purchase or upgrade the required parts before it may be needed in summer.

Conclusion

In summary, South Staffs Water's response to the 2025 drought delivered reductions to customer demand and increased supply availability, there are some areas that could be improved on. We have identified some internal improvements regarding timing of communications with customers, and the internal sharing of information. Our River Severn regulation monitoring can be improved by providing documentation. The integral relationship with the Environment Agency can be improved as well, making process more efficient, although this will take work on both sides to implement with potential support from WRW. We have also identified improvements to our planned outage, use of Nethertown and preparedness of our drought sources that will affect our ability to preserve the level at Blithfield.

Overall, communications both with internal teams and external stakeholders were good. And we ensured that our customers were supplied with water, with no environmental ramifications.

These are the key actions we have identified that we need to continue in future droughts:

- Initiate Blithfield Conservation meetings when Blithfield level begins to drop, including focus on the actions that this incorporates regarding outage, Nethertown usage etc.
- Convene the executive level team and run as incident mode at appropriate point in drought.
- Engage with customers through a range of methods to ensure broad reach.
- Continue to utilise the weekly EA update email to inform across the teams.
- Continue to be transparent on position and actions with stakeholders through meetings and forums.

After this review of the drought of 2025, we have created the following recommendations that will improve our response to a drought when it next occurs:

- Consider preparing of 'off the shelf' water efficiency tips to roll out to customers if appropriate
- Make customers aware off water saving strategies earlier in the year, so that they are not surprised when messaging ramps up during warmer months.
- Send a prompt thank you in autumn to our customers for their efforts and outline the impact.
- Investigate ways to reach more customers through marketing emails, and different forms of social media posts.
- Explore how to offer communications on drought in additional languages.
- Improve internal communications but inviting a wider number of teams to the internal Blithfield Conservation meetings.
- Continue to work with the Environment Agency on how we can most efficiently communicate with them, and avoid meetings being repeated.
- Create a 'River Regulation Management' procedure.
- Ensure our TUB "pack" is reviewed during Level 1 to keep it live and ready to deploy if required.
- Implement the new operating philosophy for Nethertown.
- Review the planning of large site planned outages in winter ahead of a potential dry summer.
- Review Brindley Bank every March to prepare for any works required.

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