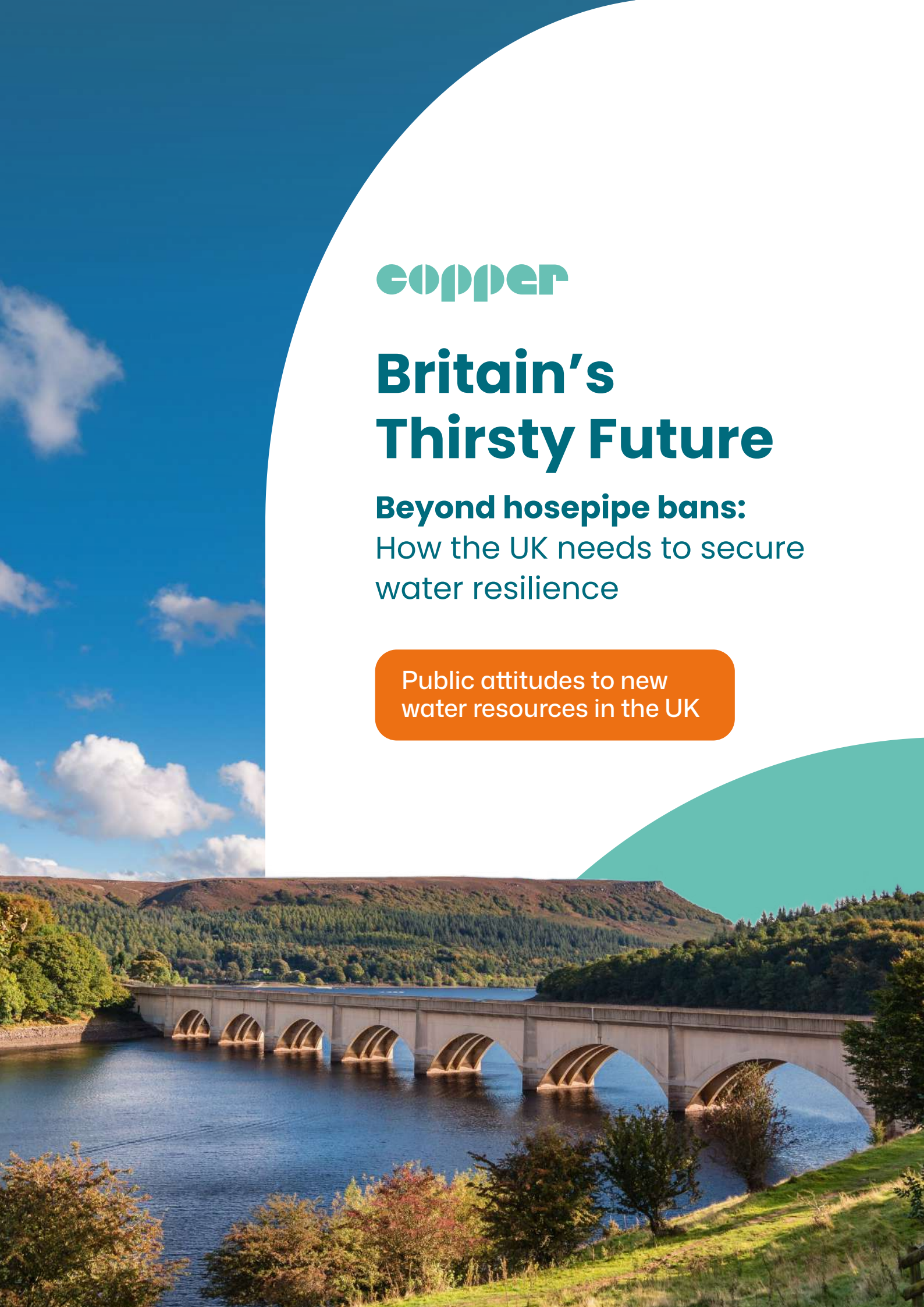




copper

Britain's Thirsty Future

Beyond hosepipe bans:

How the UK needs to secure
water resilience

Public attitudes to new
water resources in the UK

Foreword

The summer of 2026 may prove to be a watershed moment in how Britain thinks about water.

England and Wales recorded their driest July on record. In England, just 6.5 mm of rain fell during the month, equivalent to only 10% of average July rainfall. In Wales, there was 9.3 mm of rainfall, just 9% of normal levels. Southern England experienced its driest month ever recorded in climate records, which date back to 1836.

These extraordinary conditions were accompanied by exceptional heat and sunshine. The UK had its second warmest July on record, while England, Wales and the UK all experienced their sunniest July ever. England and Wales also had their sunniest calendar month on record. Together, these conditions contributed to drought affecting the whole of Wales and around half of England.

For millions of people, drought was no longer an abstract future risk. It became a visible reality. Hosepipe bans returned, wildfire warnings became commonplace and questions about water security moved from policy discussions into everyday life.

Against this backdrop, it is perhaps unsurprising that public attitudes towards water have changed from those we have encountered in recent years while working on some of the country's biggest water infrastructure projects. Our polling reveals that nearly three-quarters (74%) of people believe summers like 2026 will occur fairly often or will become the "new normal" over the next 20 years. Three-quarters (75%) are concerned about the risk of water shortages and drought in the years ahead.



Jordan Rowse
Water Sector Lead,
Copper Consultancy

The findings suggest that the public increasingly recognises what those working across the water sector have understood for some time: Britain cannot continue operating within a cycle of drought, temporary restrictions, emergency responses and delayed investment.

Importantly, the research reveals something else.

The public is not simply concerned about drought. It is increasingly supportive of the action required to address it. From reservoirs and water transfers to recycling and desalination plants, support for new water resources is stronger than many assume. The challenge facing the sector is no longer making the case that resilience matters. Increasingly, it is demonstrating how resilience can be delivered.

That distinction matters.

National support creates a licence to act. But major water resource projects are ultimately delivered in specific places, affecting specific communities and environments, and require consent. As projects move from long-term plans into real-world proposals, success will depend not only on engineering and investment but on building trust, understanding and societal licence.

This report explores public attitudes towards the infrastructure and policy interventions designed to strengthen water security. It paints a picture of a public that understands the challenge, supports a broad portfolio of solutions and increasingly expects action.

The question is no longer whether Britain needs to strengthen its water resilience.

The question is how quickly we can build the trust, confidence and consensus needed to deliver it.

Executive summary

After one of the driest and hottest summers on record, the British public increasingly sees drought as a long-term challenge rather than a temporary crisis. The findings reveal strong support for new water resources, low confidence that enough is being done to improve water security and a majority of people agreeing that Britain must move beyond short-term restrictions towards long-term resilience.

Perhaps most significantly, the research suggests the public may be further ahead than many institutions assume. Support for reservoirs, transfers, recycling schemes and desalination plants is widespread, but the challenge now is turning that support into trusted, consented and deliverable projects capable of securing Britain's water future.



Key findings

More frequent droughts expected

- 74% expect summers like 2026 to occur regularly over the next 20 years.
- 36% believe extreme heat and drought have become the “new normal”.
- 75% are concerned about future water shortages and drought.

Strong support for infrastructure investment

- 76% support new reservoirs.
- 64% support desalination plants.
- 61% support water transfers.
- 61% support water recycling schemes.

Reservoirs remain the public's preferred new water resource solution

- 57% identify new reservoirs as a top priority for reducing drought risk.
- Only fixing leaks (61%) ranks higher.

Confidence in institutions is low

- 68% say water companies are not doing enough to improve water security.
- 67% say the UK government is not doing enough.
- 61% say regulators are not doing enough.



Headline political findings

Concern cuts across party lines, but Green voters are most alarmed

- 90% of Green voters and 84% of Liberal Democrat voters are concerned about future droughts, compared with 67% of Reform UK voters.

Reservoirs unite Britain's political divide

- Support for new reservoirs reaches 90% among Conservative voters and 84% among Reform UK voters, making reservoirs one of the most politically unifying water infrastructure projects tested.

The public supports investment, but not higher bills

- Only 27% of Reform UK voters would pay more on their water bill to fund new infrastructure, compared with 56% of Liberal Democrat voters, 51% of Labour voters and 49% of Conservative voters.

Labour voters are more forgiving of institutions

- Labour supporters are significantly more likely than other voters to say both government and water companies are doing enough on water security, although a majority still believe more action is needed.

While political parties disagree on who should pay and who is responsible, there is broad cross-party support for building new water infrastructure. The debate focuses not on whether Britain needs new water resources but on how quickly they can be delivered.

Concerns around drought, dry summers and water shortages

A nation expecting a hotter, drier future

Following one of the most remarkable summers in the UK's climate record, drought is no longer viewed as an occasional environmental challenge. Instead, many people now see hotter, drier summers as an increasingly permanent feature of life in Britain.

This reflects the experience of recent months. England and Wales had their driest July on record, while the UK experienced its second warmest July and its sunniest July ever recorded. These conditions contributed to drought affecting the whole of Wales and around half of England, bringing water security into sharper public focus than at any point in recent years.

The polling suggests that the public has taken note.

- **74%** expect summers like 2026 to occur fairly often or become commonplace over the next 20 years.
- **36%** believe extreme heat and drought are already the “new normal”.
- Only **2%** believe such summers will rarely, if ever, occur.

This expectation translates directly into concerns about future water supplies. Three-quarters (**75%**) of the public is concerned about the risk of water shortages and drought over the next few years, including nearly one-third (**32%**) who say they are **very concerned**. Only one in five are unconcerned.

The findings suggest that concern about drought is being felt by more than just those with a particular interest in environmental issues. Water security is increasingly being viewed as a practical issue affecting households, communities, businesses and the wider economy.



From short-term disruption to long-term challenge

Historically, public concern about drought has tended to rise during particularly dry periods before fading when wetter weather returns. However, the results indicate a majority view that extreme summers are likely to become more frequent, requiring longer-term solutions rather than short-term emergency responses.

This matters because public perceptions help shape political and policy priorities. If drought is increasingly viewed as a recurring risk rather than an isolated event, pressure is likely to grow for greater investment in resilience, infrastructure and long-term planning.

The findings point to a public that is becoming more aware of the relationship between climate, water availability and the future security of supply. As concern grows, so too does the expectation that governments, regulators and water companies should act to prepare for the challenges ahead.

Political findings

Concern about drought spans the political spectrum, reflecting the broad national significance of the issue.

- **90% of Green voters** are concerned about the risk of future droughts and water shortages.
- **84% of Liberal Democrat voters** are concerned.
- **67% of Reform UK voters** are concerned, making them the least concerned group, though still representing a clear majority.

Views on the frequency of future extreme summers also vary politically. More than half (54%) of Green voters believe summers like 2026 are already the “new normal”, compared with around a third of Conservative and Reform UK voters.

Despite these differences in intensity, the overarching picture is one of broad political agreement. Large majorities across all major political groupings recognise drought and water shortages as genuine risks.



Key insight

The public sees drought as a long-term national challenge rather than a temporary inconvenience. Concern extends well beyond traditional environmental groups, creating a strong cross-party mandate for action on water resilience.



Public attitudes to reservoirs

The most trusted solution

Among all the new water resource options tested, reservoirs command the strongest public support and emerge as the clearest public preference for improving water security.

More than three-quarters of respondents (**76%**) support building new reservoirs, including almost half (**48%**) who **strongly support** them. Opposition is negligible, at just **4%**, making reservoirs the least controversial and most broadly supported of all the new water resource solutions considered.

Reservoirs also rank among the public's highest priorities for reducing future drought risk. When asked which measures should be prioritised, **57%** selected reservoir construction as one of their top three choices, second only to fixing leaks (**61%**).

The popularity of reservoirs likely reflects both familiarity and visibility. While awareness of many newer water resource options remains relatively low, reservoirs are well understood by the public and are often seen as a practical, common-sense solution to water scarcity. For many people, reservoirs represent a simple principle: storing water when it is plentiful so it is available when it is needed most.

The findings also suggest that the public increasingly recognises the need for additional water storage as drought conditions become more frequent. As concerns about future water shortages grow, reservoirs appear to offer a tangible and reassuring response to a challenge that many people expect to become more common in the years ahead.

Public support grows with understanding

The research found that reservoirs are the best-known of the major water resource options tested. While awareness remains relatively modest overall, storing water is significantly better understood than recycling, desalinating or transferring it.

This familiarity matters. The polling suggests that support tends to be highest where understanding is strongest. Unlike some newer or more complex

solutions, reservoirs benefit from being visible pieces of infrastructure with a long history of supplying water to communities across the UK.

The findings indicate that reservoirs continue to enjoy a level of public legitimacy that many other major infrastructure projects struggle to achieve. At a time when large-scale developments often face local opposition, reservoirs appear to begin from a position of considerable public goodwill.

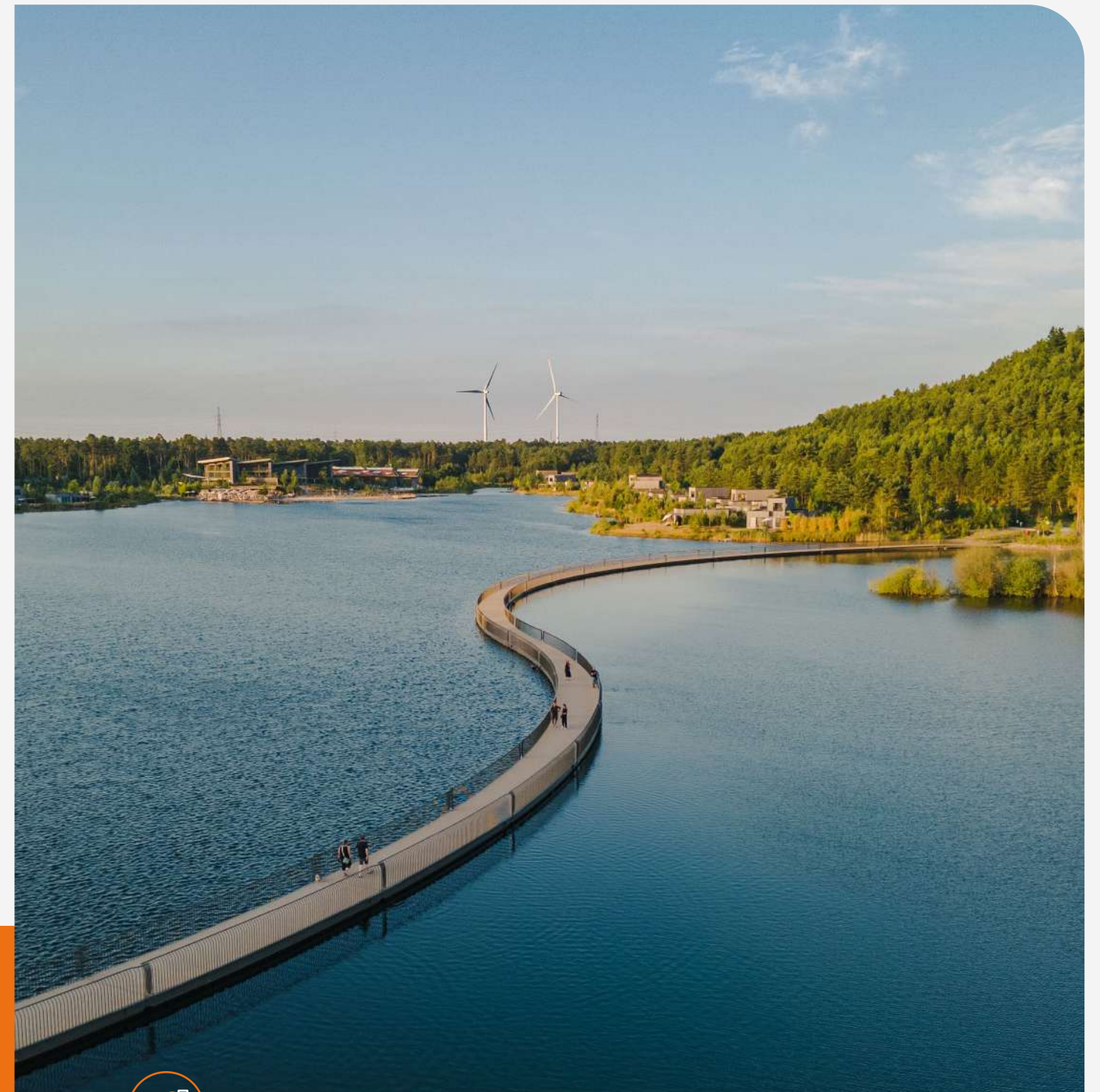
Political findings

Reservoirs enjoy remarkable political consensus, with strong support extending across the political spectrum.

- **90% of Conservative voters** support building new reservoirs.
- **84% of Reform UK voters** support reservoir construction.
- Significant majorities of Labour, Liberal Democrat and Green voters support new reservoirs.

Reservoirs are also one of the few infrastructure solutions that unite voters who may disagree on other aspects of water policy. While different political groups place varying emphasis on recycling, business efficiency or desalination, reservoirs consistently receive support from across the political spectrum.

This broad consensus presents a significant opportunity for policymakers and the water sector. In an increasingly fragmented political landscape, reservoirs appear to represent one of the few major infrastructure projects capable of commanding sustained public support from voters of all political backgrounds.



Key insight

Reservoirs are not only the most popular new water resource option, they are also the most politically unifying. As Britain looks to strengthen its water resilience, reservoirs appear to offer the strongest public mandate for action.

Public attitudes to water transfers

Strong support despite limited awareness

Water transfers are perhaps the least understood of the major options available to policymakers, yet the research suggests they are far from unpopular.

Around four in ten respondents (**43%**) had never heard of water transfers before taking part in the survey, making them the least well-known water resource solution tested. Awareness is considerably lower than for reservoirs and remains relatively limited compared with other options, such as water recycling and desalination.

However, the findings show that low awareness does not translate into low support.

Once the concept is explained, support rises significantly. Nearly two-thirds of the public (**61%**) support transferring water between regions to move supplies from wetter areas to those experiencing greater shortages, while only **7%** oppose the idea.

Key findings

- **43%** have never heard of water transfers.
- Just **24%** say they know at least something about the concept.
- **61%** support water transfers in principle.
- Only **7%** oppose them.
- Support is substantially higher than awareness, suggesting understanding rather than acceptance is the principal challenge.

The results point to an important opportunity for the water sector. Unlike some major infrastructure projects, water transfers appear to face relatively little instinctive opposition from the public. Instead, there is a large group of people who remain unfamiliar with the concept but are broadly supportive once its purpose and benefits are explained.

As drought concerns increase and regional differences in water availability become more widely understood, the principle of sharing resources across regions appears to resonate with many respondents.

The findings also reinforce a wider theme running throughout the research. The public appears increasingly open to a portfolio approach to water security. While reservoirs remain the preferred option overall, there is extensive recognition that a resilient water system may require a combination of storage, transfers, recycling, desalination and efficiency measures working together.

Political findings

Support for water transfers is relatively consistent across political groups, with little evidence of major ideological opposition. Unlike some other solutions tested, transfers do not appear to divide voters along clear political lines.

This is significant because it suggests that stakeholders have an opportunity to build wider public understanding without having to overcome entrenched political resistance.

The broader political findings also indicate that concern about future droughts extends across the political spectrum, creating a potentially supportive environment for projects designed to improve resilience and secure supplies between regions.

What this means

For water transfers, the challenge appears to be one of communication rather than consent.

Stakeholders may therefore need to focus on explaining:

- how water transfers operate in practice
- how they can help balance regional water availability
- their role in reducing drought risk during prolonged dry periods
- how they complement reservoirs, recycling and other water resource solutions.

If awareness can be increased, the findings suggest there is significant scope to build further public support.



Key insight

Water transfers are the least understood solution, but not the least supported.

Despite 43% of the public having never heard of them, six in ten support transferring water between regions once the concept is explained.

The polling suggests that public resistance is not the main challenge facing transfer schemes. Instead, awareness and understanding remain the principal barriers to building support for a potentially important component of Britain's future water resilience strategy.



Public attitudes to water recycling

From novelty to acceptance

Water recycling schemes often generate assumptions about public resistance. However, the polling suggests these concerns may be overstated.

While awareness remains relatively low, a clear majority (**61%**) support recycling wastewater into drinking water. Opposition stands at just **11%**, making it the most controversial option tested, but still one with strong overall support.

This reflects a public that increasingly recognises the need for a broader mix of solutions to address water scarcity.

However, compared with reservoirs, recycling schemes do not yet command the same instinctive confidence. They rank below reservoirs and leak reduction when respondents are asked to prioritise interventions.

Political findings

Green voters are clear outliers on water recycling.

- **51%** place water recycling among their top three priorities for reducing drought risk, significantly higher than any other voter group.
- By comparison, only **27% of Reform UK voters** prioritise water recycling, suggesting different instincts around how water security should be achieved.

This points to a broader divide in how different voter groups view water resilience. Conservative and Reform UK voters tend to place greater emphasis on traditional infrastructure, such as reservoirs and desalination, while Green voters are more likely to

support solutions focused on circular resource use and environmental efficiency.

However, the most striking finding is not the difference between parties but the broad level of acceptance across them. Despite often being viewed as the most challenging option from a public perception perspective, water recycling achieves majority support overall, suggesting the political debate will not be about whether recycled water is acceptable but about how and where it should be deployed.

The findings indicate that acceptance is already relatively high, but further public engagement and education could help strengthen confidence in recycling technology.

The “yuck factor” may be fading.

Water recycling is often assumed to be the most difficult water resource option to gain public acceptance for. Yet **six in ten people support** it, while **only 11% oppose** it. The challenge will be more about raising awareness of (and trust in) the efficacy of water recycling rather than persuading people to use recycled water.



Public attitudes to desalination

A valuable supporting option

Desalination receives stronger support than is often assumed.

Nearly two-thirds (**64%**) support desalination plants, while only **7%** oppose them. One-third (**33%**) strongly support the technology, demonstrating a substantial level of public confidence in desalination as a potential water resource option.

This places desalination ahead of both transfer and recycling in terms of overall support. At a time when the public increasingly expects more frequent droughts and water shortages, many appear willing to consider a wide range of solutions to increase resilience and secure future supplies.

One explanation for this support may be the growing recognition that climate change requires climate-resilient sources of water. Unlike reservoirs, which depend on rainfall, desalination can provide a reliable source of water regardless of weather conditions. As a climate-independent water resource, it offers an additional layer of resilience during prolonged dry periods.

However, support for desalination should not be interpreted as unconditional. Concerns about cost, energy consumption, carbon emissions, location and potential impacts on the marine environment remain important considerations. These factors have traditionally been among the most significant barriers to public and stakeholder support for desalination projects.

The findings nevertheless suggest that these concerns are being weighed against rising anxiety about water security. Faced with the prospect of more frequent droughts and increasing pressure on existing supplies, the public appears willing to view desalination as part of a broader portfolio of solutions.

Indeed, the results reinforce a wider theme emerging throughout the research. The public is not looking for a single answer to Britain's water challenges. Instead, there is growing acceptance that reservoirs, recycling, transfers, efficiency

measures and desalination may all have a role to play in building a more resilient water system.

While desalination is unlikely to represent a standalone solution to Britain's water challenges, the polling demonstrates a clear public willingness to consider it as part of a broader resilience strategy.

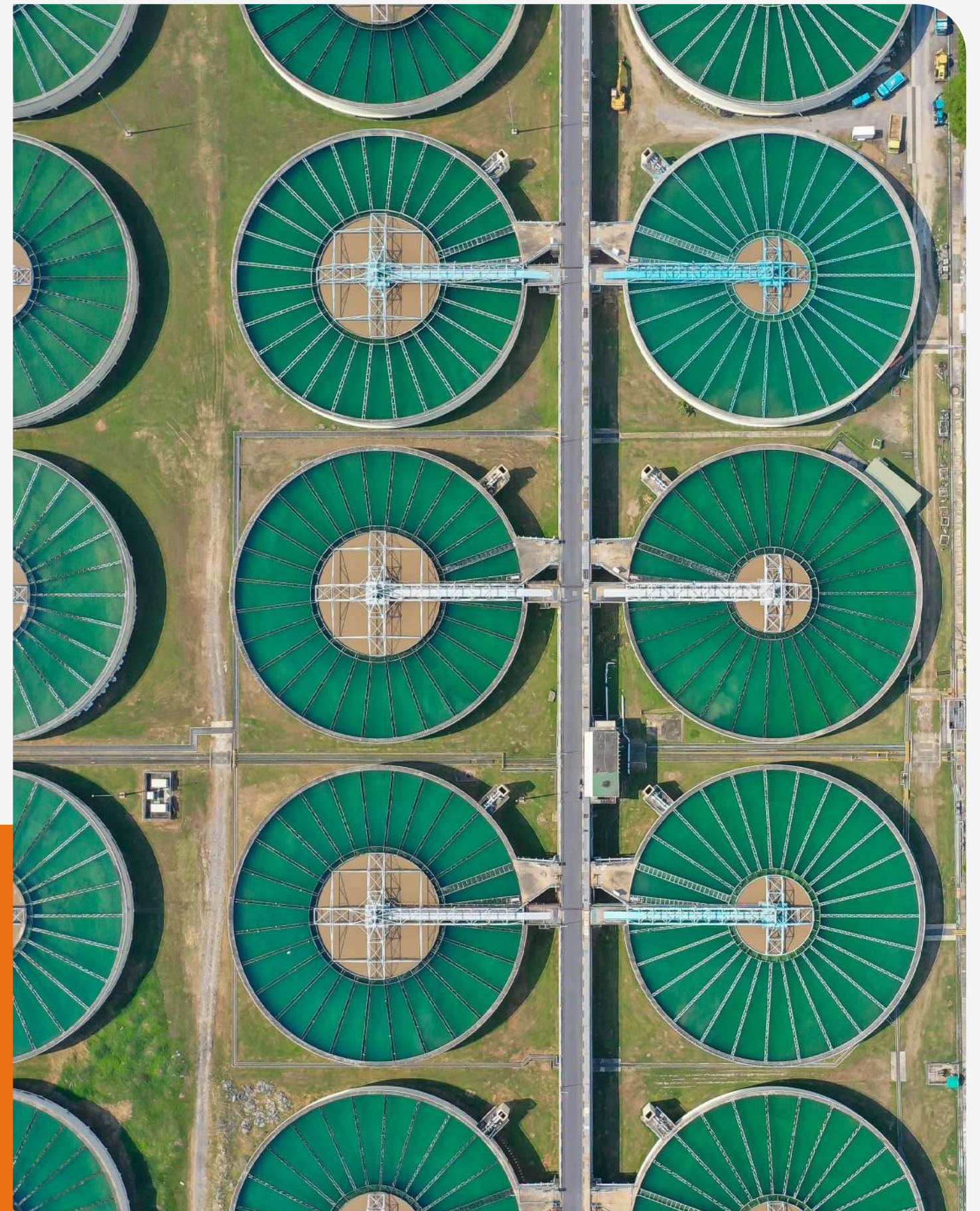
Political findings

Desalination attracts some of the most interesting political differences of any option tested.

- Conservative voters are particularly supportive, with **79%** backing desalination.
- Reform UK voters also demonstrate above-average support, with **69%** in favour.
- Green voters are the most sceptical, with **15%** opposing desalination, the highest level of opposition among any political group.

These findings suggest differing political perspectives on how water security should be delivered. Conservative and Reform UK voters appear more comfortable with large-scale engineering and infrastructure-led solutions, while Green voters are more likely to express concerns about their environmental impacts and favour alternatives such as water recycling and demand management.

However, the overall picture remains one of broad support, regardless of a respondent's political persuasion. Even among those groups expressing greater reservations, opposition remains relatively low. This suggests that debates around desalination are likely to centre on issues such as cost, environmental performance and location rather than on fundamental questions of public acceptability.



Other factors

Fixing leaks remains the public's number-one priority

If there is one finding that cuts across all sections of this research, it is that the public wants to see greater action on the existing water system, alongside investment for future infrastructure

When asked which measures should be prioritised to reduce the risk of drought and water shortages, fixing leaks emerged as the clear public priority, narrowly ahead of building new reservoirs.

What should be prioritised to reduce drought risk?

- **61%** prioritise fixing leaks.
- **57%** prioritise building new reservoirs.
- **34%** prioritise water recycling.
- **30%** prioritise business water efficiency.
- **22%** prioritise water transfers.
- **19%** prioritise reducing household water consumption.

The findings challenge the idea that the public views water resilience as a choice between fixing today's problems and preparing for tomorrow's challenges. Instead, people appear to support a more balanced approach.

The public wants both efficiency and investment

They want to see:

- existing leaks repaired and water losses reduced
- new reservoirs built to increase available supplies
- new water resources, such as recycling, transfer and desalination, developed where appropriate
- greater action from businesses and public authorities to improve resilience.

The results suggest the public increasingly understands the scale of the challenge facing the UK's water system. While fixing leaks remains the top priority, there is little evidence that people believe leakage reduction alone will resolve future water shortages.

Instead, respondents appear to recognise that hotter, drier summers, population growth and increasing pressure on water resources will require both improved efficiency and additional supply.

A question of trust

The prominence of leakage is also closely linked to broader public attitudes towards trust and accountability.

Many people believe that, before the public is asked to accept new infrastructure, behavioural change or higher costs, water companies should demonstrate they are making better use of the water already available.

This helps explain why leakage consistently ranks alongside, and in some cases ahead of, other solutions. For many members of the public, reducing leaks is not simply a technical issue. It is a visible sign that the water sector is taking water security seriously.



Key insight

The public is not choosing between fixing leaks and building new infrastructure. It wants both. The strongest mandate emerging from the polling is for a comprehensive approach that combines efficiency, investment and long-term planning to strengthen Britain's water resilience.

Political findings

The politics of water resilience reveal some important differences in emphasis:

- **Reform UK voters are the strongest supporters of fixing leaks**, with 72% placing it among their top priorities.
- **Labour and Green voters are more likely to prioritise business water efficiency**, with around four in ten identifying it as a key measure.
- **Green voters are significantly more likely to prioritise water recycling**, while Conservative and Reform UK voters tend to show stronger support for major infrastructure-led solutions, such as reservoirs and desalination plants.
- Across the political spectrum, fixing leaks and building reservoirs consistently emerge as the two most popular priorities.

Despite differences in how various voter groups believe water resilience should be delivered, there is broad agreement that more action is needed. The debate centres on the mix of solutions required, rather than on whether the challenge itself exists.

Trust, leadership and responsibility

A perception gap between concern and action

While concern about drought and water shortages is widespread, public confidence in the organisations responsible for safeguarding water supplies remains low.

The research reveals a significant gap between the public's perception of the risks facing the UK and their confidence that sufficient action is being taken to address them. At a time when three-quarters of people are concerned about future water shortages, most people believe that every major stakeholder is falling short in preparing the country for future droughts.

Who is doing enough to improve water security?

Organisation	Not doing enough
Water companies	68%
UK government	67%
Businesses	64%
Regulators	61%
Households	54%

Source: BMG Research for Copper Consultancy

Water companies face the sharpest criticism. More than two-thirds (**68%**) of survey respondents say they are not doing enough to improve water security, while **40%** say they are **definitely not doing enough**. The UK government receives a similarly critical assessment, with **67%** believing it is falling short of what is required.

The findings suggest that the public views water security as a leadership challenge rather than simply an environmental one. There is a growing expectation

that governments, regulators, businesses and water companies should take a more proactive role in preparing the country for a hotter, drier future.

A demand for leadership

The public's support for reservoirs, transfers, recycling schemes and desalination plants is notable, given the low levels of trust identified elsewhere in the research. Taken together, the findings suggest people are not opposed to new infrastructure. Rather, they want to see clearer plans, stronger leadership and greater urgency in delivering solutions.

The polling also points to a belief that responsibility should be shared. While households are viewed more favourably than other groups, a majority still believe domestic consumers could do more to help improve water resilience. However, the public clearly places the greatest responsibility on institutions with the greatest ability to act.

Political findings

Attitudes towards responsibility vary across political groups.

- **Labour voters are the most forgiving of government and water companies**, with 34% saying each is doing enough, considerably higher than the national average.
- Even among Labour voters, however, a majority still believes government action does not go far enough.
- **Reform UK voters are among the most critical**, with 77% saying the government is not doing enough to improve water security.
- Across all major voter groups, concern about future droughts translates into a common expectation that more action is required.



Key insight

The public is concerned about whether those responsible for managing the UK's water resources are doing enough to prepare for future droughts.

The message emerging from the research is clear: support for new water resources exists, but the public increasingly expects visible leadership, long-term planning and tangible action to strengthen the UK's water resilience.



Paying for water security

Support has limits

While support for new water resources is strong, the polling reveals a clear tension between backing investment in principle and paying for it in practice.

A majority of people support the need for a wide portfolio of water supply solutions. However, when respondents are asked whether they would be willing to pay slightly more on their water bill to help fund these projects, support falls significantly.

- **54% are unwilling** to pay more on their water bill to fund new infrastructure.
- **38% are willing** to pay slightly more.
- Just **11% are very willing** to pay more.

The findings highlight one of the central challenges facing policymakers, regulators and water companies in the years ahead. While there is broad public recognition that investment is needed, there remains significant sensitivity about who should bear the cost.

This is particularly understandable against a backdrop of wider cost-of-living pressures and ongoing scrutiny of water company performance. For many people, support for new infrastructure appears conditional on confidence that existing resources are being managed effectively and that investment delivers clear and tangible benefits.

Importantly, the results should not be interpreted as opposition to new water resources. Rather, they suggest the public is seeking reassurance that investment is necessary, affordable and represents value for money. Put simply, people support action on water security, but they want confidence that costs will be shared fairly and that those responsible for delivering projects are held accountable.



A question of value

The findings suggest that public acceptance of future investment will depend on a clear and compelling case for action.

The sector may need to demonstrate:

- why new infrastructure is required alongside efforts to reduce leakage and improve efficiency
- how investment will reduce drought risk and improve long-term resilience
- what benefits customers, communities and the environment will receive in return
- how costs will be managed and shared fairly over time.

As concern about future water shortages grows, the debate is increasingly shifting from whether investment is needed to how it should be funded.

Political findings

Attitudes towards funding vary significantly across the political spectrum.

Reform UK voters are the most resistant to higher water bills:

- Just **27%** would be willing to pay more to fund new infrastructure.
- **36%** say they are **not willing at all** to pay more.

By contrast:

- **56% of Liberal Democrat voters** would be willing to pay more.
- **51% of Labour voters** would be willing to pay more.
- **49% of Conservative voters** would be willing to pay more.

This suggests that, while support for new infrastructure is largely cross-party, there is less agreement on how it should be funded. Future debates are therefore likely to focus not on the principle of investment but on questions of affordability, fairness and who should bear the costs.



Key insight

The public supports investment in water security, but not at any price. Winning support for future funding will require a clear demonstration of value, fairness and delivery.

The findings suggest that public support for new water resources provides an important mandate for action. However, maintaining that support will depend on demonstrating that investment is being delivered efficiently, responsibly and with clear benefits for customers and communities.

What the findings mean

A mandate for action

Several clear themes emerge from this research. Taken together, they paint a picture of a public that is very much aware of the challenges facing the UK's water system and largely supportive of the actions required to address them.

The summer of 2026 appears to have reinforced a growing recognition that drought is no longer an occasional disruption but a recurring risk that requires long-term planning. With three-quarters of the public concerned about water shortages and a similar proportion expecting summers like 2026 to occur regularly in future, water security is becoming a mainstream public issue rather than a niche environmental concern.

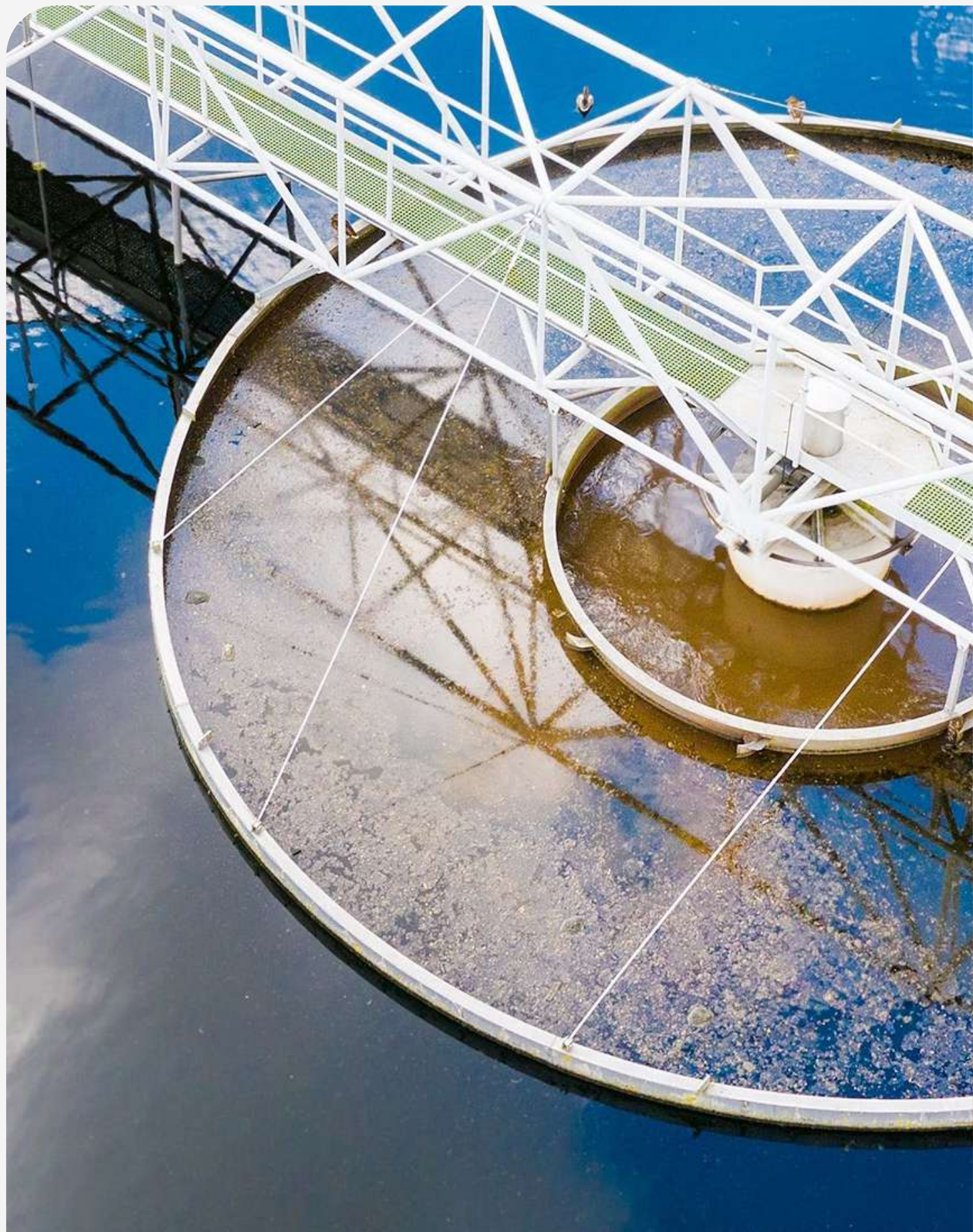
Several key conclusions emerge from the findings:

- **The public views drought as a long-term challenge rather than a temporary crisis.** Extreme heat, drought conditions and water shortages are seen as issues that Britain will need to adapt to, rather than occasional events that can be managed through short-term restrictions alone.
- **There is strong support for a diverse portfolio of solutions.** Water storage is the most trusted and popular option, but water transfer, recycling and desalination all command majority support. The findings suggest the public recognises that no single intervention will be sufficient to secure future supplies.

- **The public wants delivery, not debate.** Support for new infrastructure is accompanied by widespread concern that government, regulators and water companies are not doing enough to improve water security. There is a growing expectation that plans should be translated into action.
- **Efficiency remains critical.** Fixing leaks is the public's top priority, demonstrating that people expect existing resources to be managed more effectively alongside investment in new supplies. The public is looking for a balanced approach that combines efficiency, resilience and environmental responsibility.
- **Public support should not be taken for granted.** While the public broadly supports investing in new water resources in principle, this support should not be taken for granted. Many remain reluctant to pay more on their water bills, while national support does not automatically translate into local consent. Future projects will need to demonstrate clear value, fairness and tangible benefits, alongside meaningful engagement that builds trust, understanding and societal licence.

Perhaps most significantly, the research reveals a broad consensus around the need for action – no matter which political party respondents identify with.





From need to place

One of the most significant implications of the research is what it suggests about the future debate around new water resources.

Historically, major water resource projects have often had to justify two separate questions:

- Why are they needed?
- Why should they be built here?

The polling suggests that the first question may be becoming easier to answer. Public concern about drought is high, expectations of more frequent extreme summers are growing and there is broad support for investment in new water resources. Together, these findings point to a growing public acceptance that additional infrastructure will be needed to secure future water supplies.

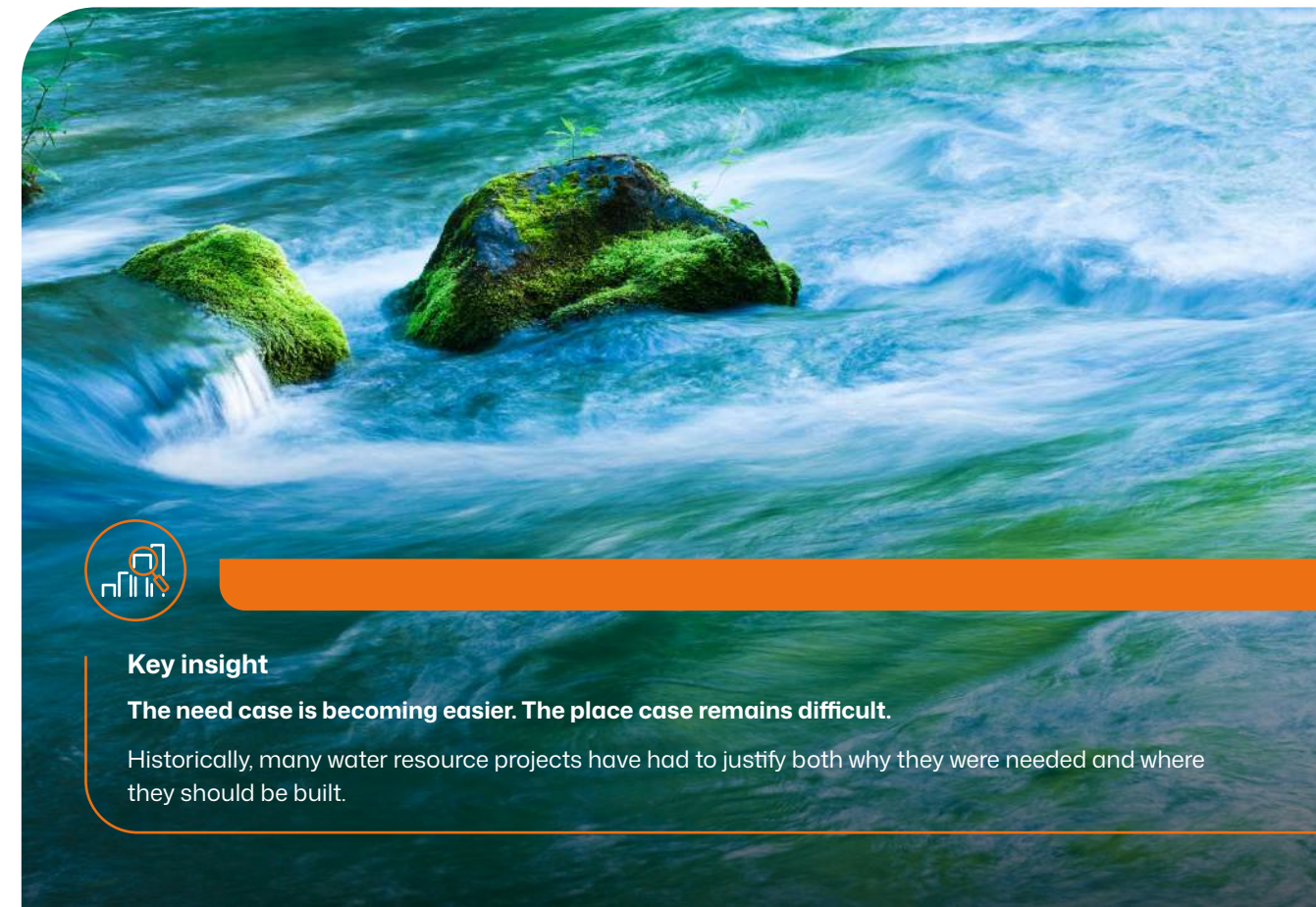
The second question remains considerably more complex.

As projects move from strategic plans into real-world proposals, debate is likely to shift

away from whether infrastructure should be built and towards where it should be located, how its impacts should be managed and what benefits it will deliver for affected communities. While national support creates an important mandate for action, successful delivery will continue to depend on building trust, addressing concerns and creating confidence among local communities and stakeholders.

While voters disagree on priorities, funding and responsibility, there is little evidence of widespread opposition to the infrastructure required to strengthen water resilience. Support for new resources extends across political divides, providing policymakers with a stronger mandate for action than is often assumed.

For the water sector, the findings present both an opportunity and a challenge. The opportunity is that public acceptance of new water resources is considerably stronger than is sometimes believed. The challenge is demonstrating that projects can be delivered effectively, affordably and in a way that enhances trust.



Key insight

The need case is becoming easier. The place case remains difficult.

Historically, many water resource projects have had to justify both why they were needed and where they should be built.

From public support to project delivery

National support creates a licence to act. Consent determines whether projects get delivered.

The survey's findings demonstrate that the public accepts the need for action. However, support in principle should not be confused with support in practice.

Major infrastructure projects are ultimately delivered in specific locations, and affect specific communities, environments and landscapes. While national support provides an important mandate for investment, individual projects will continue to face scrutiny around issues such as site selection, environmental impacts, construction disruption, visual impact and perceived local benefit.

The findings therefore point to an important shift for the water sector. For many projects, the challenge may no longer be demonstrating the need for new infrastructure. Increasingly, the challenge is securing trust, building understanding and maintaining support as projects move from concept to reality.



Key insight

National support creates a licence to act. Consent determines whether projects get delivered.

The polling suggests public acceptance of the need for action. Yet questions around where infrastructure is located, how development impacts are managed and how communities are involved in decision-making are likely to become increasingly important.

Lessons from major water resource projects

Drawing on Copper's experience supporting reservoirs, water transfers, water recycling schemes and desalination projects across the UK, several common themes consistently emerge:

- Communities are more receptive when the need for investment is clearly explained.
- Early engagement is more effective than late-stage consultation.
- Local concerns are often different from national debates.
- Trust and transparency are as important as technical evidence.
- Small but highly motivated groups can have a significant influence on public debate and project outcomes.
- Building societal licence is an ongoing process, not a single consultation milestone.
- Projects are most successful when communities can see local as well as national benefits.

While the findings suggest a strong national mandate for improving water resilience, successful delivery will require sustained engagement, stakeholder confidence and a clear demonstration of how projects benefit both current and future generations.

From awareness to acceptance

Another important theme emerging from the research is that public awareness and public support are not always aligned.

For example:

- **43%** of respondents surveyed had never heard of water transfers, yet **61%** support them once the concept is explained.
- **33%** had never heard of water recycling, yet **61%** support it once the concept is explained.
- **37%** had never heard of desalination, yet **64%** support it once the concept is explained.

These findings suggest that for many new water resources the principal challenge may not be overcoming opposition but improving understanding.



Key insight

The challenge facing new water resources may not be public opposition but public understanding.

Conclusion

Breaking the cycle of drought

Summer 2026 may be remembered as the moment when public attitudes caught up with the realities of climate change.

The findings reveal a public that understands the challenge. Most people expect hotter, drier summers to become more common. Most are concerned about the implications for water supplies. And most support investment in the infrastructure needed to build long-term resilience.

Critically, support extends across a range of solutions. From reservoirs and water transfers to recycling and desalination plants, the public appears ready to embrace a portfolio approach to water security. The research suggests the public recognises that there is no single answer to Britain's water challenges and that strengthening resilience will require action on multiple fronts.

This creates an important opportunity for government, regulators and the water sector.

For decades, droughts have often triggered short-term restrictions, emergency measures and renewed debate before attention shifted elsewhere. The polling suggests the public recognises that this cycle is unsustainable. The conversation is beginning to move beyond how we respond to drought and towards how we prepare for it.

Yet support in principle is only the beginning.

While the public broadly supports new water resources, that support should not be taken for granted. National support does not automatically translate into local consent, and successful projects will continue to face

scrutiny around issues such as location, environmental impact, affordability and community benefit.

As strategic plans become real-world proposals, the challenge for the sector will increasingly be one of trust, engagement and delivery. Building societal licence is not a one-off consultation exercise. It is a continuous process of listening, participation and confidence-building.

The polling suggests that Britain is ready for new water resources. The challenge is no longer making the case for action. The challenge is turning public support into trusted, consented and deliverable projects.

National support creates a licence to act.

Consent determines whether projects get delivered.

The task now is to build the trust, understanding and societal licence needed to deliver the reservoirs, transfers, recycling schemes and desalination plants that will secure water supplies for future generations.

Only then will Britain move beyond short-term drought management and build lasting water resilience.

About Copper – our work in water

For more than 30 years, Copper Consultancy has helped organisations navigate complex stakeholder, political and communications challenges, providing the insight, engagement and strategic counsel needed to deliver nationally significant infrastructure.

We are one of the UK's leading communications and engagement consultancies in the water sector, supporting clients to secure consent, manage risk, build trust and strengthen reputation throughout the life cycle of major projects.

Our team has extensive experience supporting the development of new water resources, including **reservoirs, water transfers, water recycling schemes and desalination projects**. Working across Strategic Resource Options (SROs), water resource management planning and major infrastructure programmes, we help clients navigate complex consenting environments, engage effectively with communities and stakeholders, and build the societal licence needed to bring projects forward successfully.

From early-stage strategy and public affairs through to consultation, examination and delivery, we support water companies, regulators, contractors and the wider supply chain to communicate the need for investment and demonstrate the benefits it can bring for customers, communities and the environment.

Our approach combines deep sector expertise with research-led insight and creative communications. We design engagement programmes that help clients:

- build public and stakeholder understanding of major water resource projects
- de-risk planning and consenting processes
- navigate political and regulatory scrutiny
- develop and maintain societal licence
- build consensus around complex and often contentious infrastructure proposals
- strengthen trust and reputation with customers and communities.

Through our industry-leading research and public attitudes programme, we provide clients with evidence-based insights into how the public perceives water, drought, resilience and infrastructure investment. These insights help inform decision-making, strengthen engagement strategies and support wider industry conversations about securing the UK's water future.

Ultimately, our role is simple: to help the water sector deliver the infrastructure and investment needed to provide resilient water supplies, meet the needs of future generations and leave the environment in a better place.





For further information, please contact:

**Jordan Rowse, Water Sector Lead at
Copper Consultancy**



jordan.rowse@copperconsultancy.com



07908 704835