

## ENVIRONMENT

# Britain is running out of water... so why are we not collecting rain?

As drought conditions intensify it's time to follow our European neighbours. By **Bill McGuire**



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“**S**ave water – bath with a friend”: this has to be the most risqué public information advice ever broadcast by the British government, but it certainly caught the mood at the height of the 1976 drought. Within days it was on badges and plastered across T-shirts. It might even have saved some water.

As drought conditions intensify across the UK, following the hottest spring on record, and with much of England under a hosepipe ban which is set to continue into autumn, it is time to think again about how we might save water.

It might seem strange that, on an island renowned for its drizzle, we should find ourselves hit once again by water shortages, but this should not really come as a surprise on a planet where global warming is running amok. Six of the hottest years on record in the UK have occurred in the past 10, while three of the hottest summers happened in the past five years.

Greater heat drives increased evaporation, and a hotter atmosphere can hold more water vapour and suck up surface water more rapidly. This can result in so-called flash droughts that can build in a matter of weeks.

Looking ahead, the picture looks pretty grim. Already the South East is designated as suffering from “severe water stress”, and another seven regions could follow as soon as 2030. By mid-century, the prospect of severe drought conditions resulting in water supply to households being cut off for an extended period is a real one.

Plans for nine new reservoirs – the first for more than 30 years – were recently announced by the Government, but is this really the answer? After decades of gross underinvestment, the privatised water industry is rubbing its hands with glee, because reservoirs appear as assets on their books, and therefore increase the value of the companies.

Whether these reservoirs end up being built or not, continuing to ensure that everyone has enough water is going to be a huge challenge in the decades ahead as the heat continues to build.

We need to look at other ways of tackling the problem.



Rainwater can be used for watering plants and vegetables  
GETTY

Water consumption per head in the UK is amongst the highest in Europe, while at the same time the equivalent of more than 1,200 Olympic-sized swimming pools of water is lost through leaks every day. Clearly, there is a huge amount of slack to be taken up before spending billions on new reservoirs. There is also plenty we can do ourselves, both to cut usage and to provide us with some peace of mind if and when the supply is cut off.

When it comes to saving water Britain is far behind Europe, where both heat and drought have been building more rapidly in recent years. One of the solutions being embraced here, to handle water shortages, is what is called

rainwater harvesting. Germany is ahead of the field, with almost two million homes having facilities to intercept and store rainwater. This is then used mainly for outdoor washing tasks, so that reliance on a centralised drinking water supply is reduced by the equivalent of around 50,000 Olympic-sized swimming pools every year.

At the same time, there is the added bonus that less water flowing into storm drains during downpours also acts to reduce the risk of flooding. This has not all happened by accident, but is a consequence of tax breaks and subsidies from the German government, and it's an approach being followed by other European

countries too, including Belgium, France and Switzerland.

It makes sense in the UK too, where winter rainfall – which is actually increasing – can be stored for the hotter months, alongside intercepted thundery downpours that are already a common feature of our summers. Given that something like 13,000 gallons (59,000 litres) of rain falls on the average UK roof every year – more than one third of the average water usage for a four-person household – it seems daft not to intercept it.

Buying a harvesting system that links seamlessly with a mains supply is expensive, but purchasing the kit for linking gutters to water butts is cheap and easy to install. With almost an acre

of land, on which we grow more than 30 varieties of fruit and veg, rainwater harvesting is essential for us. But it actually makes sense for everyone.

The intercepted rainfall can be used for watering the garden – which plants prefer anyway – or cleaning the car, along with patios and driveways, windows and floors and, if you wish, flushing the loo.

When you think about it, using drinking water for all these activities seems more than a little bit bonkers. Drinking rainwater, even after it has been boiled, is not safe, due to contaminants picked up in the atmosphere and while stored, but you can buy filtering systems that make it potable.

Rainwater harvesting is

There is no national rainwater management strategy and no serious incentives to reuse rain

worthwhile because it provides some degree of self-sufficiency, but the key takeaway here is that if millions of households harvest rainwater and use it for as many tasks as possible, then demand for increasingly precious mains drinking water can be massively reduced, allowing it to go further and cutting the chances of stand-pipes in the street during future droughts that are only going to get worse.

Some local councils and water utilities provide grants or rebates to cover part of the cost of installing rainwater harvesting equipment, and businesses may qualify for help with the cost of installation in the form of tax credits. At the moment, though, there is no national rainwater management strategy, little available public information on the subject and no serious incentives for households or businesses to reuse rain. This has to change.

Before water users are forced to cough up billions in higher bills to pay for new reservoirs, the government must incentivise rainwater harvesting at a level that drives a big take-up. At the same time, it needs to force water companies to do far more to prevent the leaks that mean colossal volumes of water are lost every year. Not to do this makes no sense at all.

As long as we keep pumping out carbon dioxide, our climate – both in the UK and across the world – is going to get hotter and water is going to become ever more scarce. Future droughts, driven by 40°C-plus heatwaves, will make this summer and that of 1976 seem cool and damp in comparison. Severe water shortages are now inevitable, and if we don't get our act together now, in order to make the most of the water that falls out of the skies, we are going to be in deep trouble.

Measures we take today will bear fruit in the decades ahead. If we do nothing, then we will all eventually have to resign ourselves to hours queuing in the street for water. Meanwhile, bathing with a friend is definitely out, but I am sure a quick shared shower would be absolutely fine.

**Bill McGuire is emeritus professor of geophysical and climate hazards at University College London**

### Top tips Six easy ways to save water at home

■ Only if we can see how much we are using can we seriously cut back, so getting a water meter installed is a no-brainer in terms of reducing demand, especially as it will save you money as well.

■ Using the “eco” settings on your dishwasher and washing machine can save 40 litres of water a day. Baths use huge amounts of water – swapping one weekly bath for a shower can save you about 4,000 litres of water annually. Having shorter showers at around five to

seven minutes also reduces water use. If you want to go further, you can now buy water-saving taps, showers and toilets.

■ Turn off the tap whilst brushing your teeth – this can save a typical household 9,000 litres of water a year according to Water UK.

■ Fill your kettle to a lower level and do not replace the water before every boil. A 10 per cent reduction in kettle water use can save 3.65 gallons of water a year.

■ Do less washing up. Leaving most washing up until the end of the day can reduce frequently running your tap water – as can putting as much as possible in the dishwasher.

■ Avoid half-full washing loads. Only filling your washing machine halfway uses more than 50 per cent the energy and water of a full load. Washing machines use on average 60 litres of water per cycle so running them less frequently can save water.

## MONEY

# I am finally free of nursery fees – but the £50,000 cost will haunt me

Even after a Government boost, costs for parents are crippling. By **Hannah Fearn**

**A**s I am writing this piece, my youngest daughter is spending her final hours in the care of our local nursery. When I pick her up at 5pm, it will mark the end of seven long and expensive years paying a second mortgage for part-time childcare.

Neither of my two children has attended for more than three days a week, but still we've spent the equivalent of a deposit on another house on childcare. Getting them from birth to Reception class while still trying to hold on to some semblance of my career has cost our family around £50,000.

Despite that vast outlay (enough for a bespoke kitchen! A Caribbean cruise every year!) I still feel like I've dodged a bullet. The Government has invested a staggering £5bn in childcare support for England, by expanding eligibility for 30 free hours to children over nine months old, yet the cost to parents keeps on going up.

New data published by business comparison firm Bionic show that the average office worker is spending £11,284 a year on childcare – £940 a month. But with nursery fees still rising and more companies also issuing return-to-office mandates, this is set to rise to more than £16,000 a year per child by 2027, for a full-time nursery place.

With the average worker making an annual salary of £37,430, families will be spending almost a quarter of their total pre-tax income on childcare alone. I can't help but feel very relieved that I'm getting out now.

Meanwhile just across the Channel in France, the average family pays around €350-€400 (£303-£346) a month in childcare fees, less than half what we do. The highest earners do pay more, but provision is means-tested, with some of the lowest income households paying as little as €1 a day for care.

England's childcare crisis is largely down to the total failure of the Government's subsidy system. We now know that previous Conservative governments promised “free” hours of childcare for parents, despite knowing the funding provided would not cover

it. Nurseries had no choice but to increase “top-up” fees. Years of inflation have made even bigger holes in their budgets – resulting in them closing down in high numbers, and parents facing long waiting lists for a place.

The proliferation of private nursery provision is relatively new, confined to the past 15 to 20 years. Before that, female participation in the formal workforce after children was far lower and informal care provided by family members, neighbours and friends played a more important role.

Grandparents are still playing an important role, but society has changed. We are less likely to live near our wider family networks. The cost of meeting basic household needs, and the cost of housing, has almost doubled in real terms over that same time period.

Nurseries are not a useful support for parents, they are essential economic infrastructure.

Realising something had to change, the Government did act. Funded hours used to make up 50 per cent of nursery income, but now it's 80-90 per cent. But even under the expanded scheme, nurseries are not given enough money to cover the cost of each funded place and there are now fewer non-funded hours to cross-subsidise from. Result? Those fees are going up.

The problem is that the model, as it stands, just doesn't work. More nurseries are predicted to close, many in underserved areas, because of the financial shortfall – a move that could push even more families into poverty as one parent is forced out of work to look after toddlers.

Five years is only a short period of a child's life, but it's a long chapter for a mother's earning potential. In reality, with two children or more, these costs and tough choices cast a shadow over more than a decade of family life.

For my family, we barely have a moment of reprieve. The school gates are opening at last, but I've just received notification that our water rates have just almost doubled from £60 a month to £110.

For seven long years, childcare costs have dictated how we worked, what we earned, and where we spent and saved. Losing that huge nursery bill should feel liberating, but all it really means is bracing for the next demand.

Over seven long years, we have spent the equivalent of a deposit on another house on childcare



The Woodhead reservoir in Longdendale, north Derbyshire BLOOMBERG