



## STAKEHOLDER BRIEFING

# Water

March 2026

### Introduction to UK environmental horticulture and landscaping

The Horticultural Trades Association (HTA) represents around 1400 UK businesses, including growers, retailers, suppliers, and landscapers who collectively deliver the gardens, green spaces, and green infrastructure that delivers for the economy, environment, climate change adaptation, flood resilience and our health and wellbeing.

Each year, the environmental horticulture sector delivers £38bn to GDP and supports 722,000 jobs.

### Water resilience, restrictions, and horticulture

As an industry that relies on water to flourish, we fully support greater water resilience for all. A comprehensive, long-term water resilience strategy is long overdue.

We have long encouraged, and will continue to advise, horticultural business to reduce their reliance on mains water through the use of rainwater capture technology. In fact, according to the HTA's Water Use survey of Ornamental Growers and Garden Retailers, in 2025, 23% of UK growers and 36% of garden centre retailers were using rainwater capture and recycling systems, with 64% using automated watering systems. 52% of growers owned reservoirs, with 24% wanting to build one, however 18% cite costs as the main barrier. Progress is being made but planning difficulties and high capital costs remain a significant barrier.

In 2023, the previous government committed to increasing the percentage of water storage used by the agriculture and horticulture sectors by 66% by 2050. While that is a welcome ambition, achieving it requires investment in equipment and technology.

Incentives like DEFRA's Water Management Grants were a welcome initiative but had limited success because the investment minimum was too high to make it viable for SMEs, who make up 98% of HTA member businesses within the environmental horticulture and landscaping sector. Set against a backdrop of increasing business costs, growers need financial support to help take pressure off the UK's water system and provide an economic and environmental return on investment.

Garden centres and ornamental plant growers use around 19.4



### Key asks for Policy Makers

- 1. A long-term UK water resilience strategy**
- 2. Reframe the conversation:** from crisis response to long-term resilience planning. Do this by resetting the National Drought Group into a National Water Resilience Group that can plan for future need, whatever the weather.
- 3. Improve public messaging:** by working with industries like horticulture to improve water literacy and reduce misleading messaging. Do this by providing practical guidance on how to reduce water use and support sustainable gardening, using messaging around water restrictions rather than hosepipe bans which negatively impact and target the sector.
- 4. Incentivise and lift barriers to onsite water storage:** by removing unnecessary planning red tape that blocks businesses from investing in reservoirs and rainwater harvesting systems. Ensure new homes have rainwater storage built in at the time of construction.
- 5. Partner with the sector:** and engage with horticulture experts to achieve the above. Our members know what plants are best suited to local conditions and how to use water efficiently. Their expertise is a resource that must be better utilised.



million cubic metres of water per year, equivalent to **just 0.15% of the UK's total water use**. Household consumption accounts for around 54% with leakage and operational losses accounting for 24%. Yet messaging around water restrictions – often termed hosepipe bans – have a direct, negative impact on the sector.

### Temporary Use Bans

The provisions for businesses growing/selling plants for commercial purposes under a Temporary Use Ban and Ordinary Drought Order Restrictions have been critical in England this year. The exemptions relating to watering gardens for drip irrigation systems, new turf, planting, and trees are similarly vital to the business continuity of our landscaper and garden designer members. The industry will continue to increase its use of rainwater capture, but in the event of sustained drought periods, before the necessary funding for investment is available, these provisions enable industry to continue to operate.

The (Water Resources (Scotland) Act 2013) enables Scottish Water to apply exemptions or exceptions when it puts forward a Water Shortage Order, but does not set out what they are, nor does it explicitly include the provisions around watering plants kept or grown for sale.

- WRE:** Water Resources East
- WRSE:** Water Resources South East
- WRS:** Water Resources West
- WReN:** Water Resources North
- WCWR:** West Country Water Resources

### HTA member case studies and insights

The Environmental Horticulture and Landscaping industry will continue investing in water resilience, making plant and tree production even more sustainable, but that hard work, time, and investment can be quickly undermined by the absence of a long-term water resilience strategy. While HTA members do the right thing on the production side, water restrictions have a huge impact on demand, which in turn, impacts the entire supply chain.

As the case studies below will highlight, water restrictions – or even the threat of water restrictions – results in less demand for plants as consumers fear they won't be able to water their gardens, and that lack of confidence in the market feeds through to growers who face reduced or cancelled orders. Many landscaping projects include the use of mature trees, which can be costly, so if a client is concerned that they could die because they can't be watered, they either alter, postpone, or cancel that work. This has a detrimental impact on many of our landscaper members who tend to be micro or small businesses.

Figure 4: Sum of regional shortfall (2025 Vs 2050, excluding drought measures)

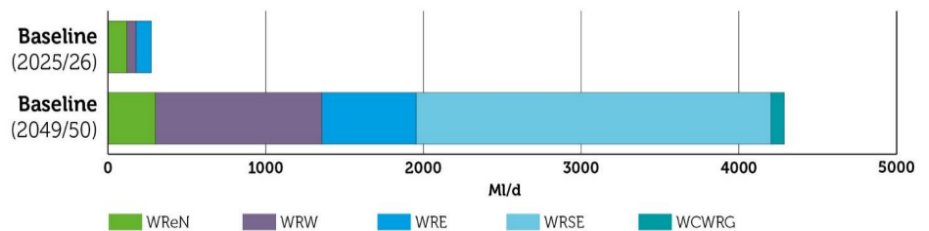
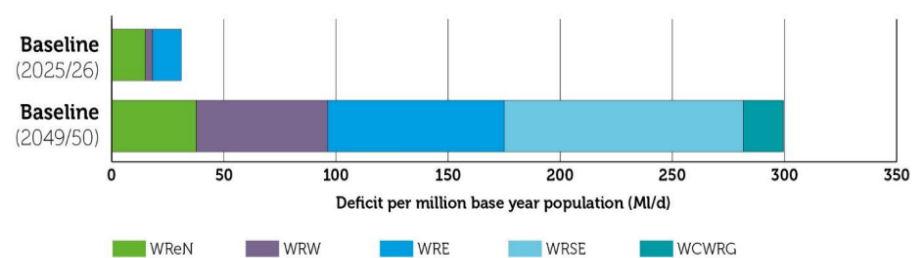


Figure 5: Forecast shortfall per million base year population (normalised)



Source: Summary of Regional Plans for Water Resources – November 2022



Clarity in messaging and communications about water restrictions and exemptions really can't be overstated.

- The following comes from an **HTA garden centre and nursery member** based in the Home Counties.

Set across 10 acres, there is a borehole on site, operated by a control system to ensure that no more than 20 cubic metres is extracted each day. The site has water storage capacity of around 150 cubic metres and uses computer-controlled irrigation across the site to ensure maximum efficiency of water use.

*"We don't currently have water restrictions in place in our area, but we're monitoring the situation closely and doing our very best to use water efficiently. The last time we faced water restrictions was in 2012 and it had a major impact on our business, with significantly reduced footfall and sales down around 20%. For any business facing the ever-rising costs that we have seen since then, that's just not sustainable."*

*"If water restrictions are introduced again, we will be forced to reduce staffing levels and alter our planned investment strategy. That's a really bitter pill to swallow, particularly when this isn't a result of anything we are doing directly as business, but because of mismanagement of resources by the water companies. In England alone, almost three million litres of water are lost every single day because of poor infrastructure and leaky pipes, yet bills go up and horticulture businesses, like ours suffer the most when restrictions are introduced. It's simply not good enough when people's livelihoods are at stake."*

- The following comes from an **HTA wholesale nursery member** based in Hertfordshire.

The nursery operates across two sites, both of which have boreholes and lagoons, to provide for the nursery's water needs. Borehole access is controlled by local river levels, so water can only be drawn from them when river levels are stable. One site has access to mains water, but this is expensive and puts additional pressure on the system, which serves local housing. Mains water is therefore used as a last resort, but in particularly dry weather, when access to boreholes is paused, the nursery has no option but to tap into it.

The second site does not have access to mains water. It uses a mix of sub-irrigation systems including a closed irrigation system to maximise water efficiency, however achieving this has taken significant resources. The lack of access to a secure and sufficient water resource meant the site could not be fully brought into production for many years. To address this, the owners applied for a water resilience grant to help support with the costs and project management of building a reservoir on site. Although the reservoir would have made the site 100% self-sufficient in irrigation water, supported increased plant production, and local jobs, the grant application was rejected, and owners informed their business was not eligible. As a result, building the reservoir cost over £140,000 and took more than five years to complete. Issues relating to licencing and water monitoring have caused further delays in bringing the reservoir into use.

*"It was a shame that an environmental horticulture business – a business that relies on water to grow the nation's plants – wasn't eligible to receive a grant that would have helped support the nursery's water resilience. Building the reservoir has been incredibly costly, and it's taken us so much longer than it would have if we'd had some support. We want to do the right thing, and luckily, we were able to make the investments, but for some businesses, it just wouldn't be viable without support and that needs to change. Doing our bit to store and use water more efficiently, while taking pressure off the water system, isn't a nice to have, it's a necessity, especially as droughts become more frequent in the UK."*



- The following comes from a **member of the Association of Professional Landscapers (a specialist group of the HTA)** based in Buckinghamshire.

*“As a landscaper, it’s difficult to overstate how important accurate communications and limited exceptions to water restrictions are. Exceptions that allow watering of new turf, plants and trees with a hosepipe for a limited time after planting are vital to giving clients the confidence to go ahead with landscaping projects. The vast majority of landscaping businesses are small or micro-businesses serving clients in one region. Even a small number of client cancellations can cause real hardship and business failures, and so the confidence and assurance these exemptions provide to landscapers and clients alike are vital.”*

*“The exemption for drip irrigation systems is also invaluable, giving clients confidence that any landscaping project they go ahead with can be responsibly watered and sustained after completion. Indeed, as landscapers we’re uniquely positioned to advise clients on the long-term water saving benefits of these systems; we often do so as part of aftercare advice for a landscaped garden. We should also note that many of the clients we work with are elderly or affected by disability. The frequently reported but misleading term ‘hosepipe ban’ is extremely unhelpful in this context. We often find that our elderly clients are not aware of the exemptions water companies make for their priority service users or blue badge holders. It’s essential for these gardeners’ safety and well-being that communications make clear that restrictions don’t force them to risk falls or worse by attempting to carry and lift heavy watering cans.”*

- The following comes from an **HTA wholesale nursery member** based in the South East.

Set across 18-acres, the site has 11 water tanks with storage capacity for 1,700 cubic metres of water, a borehole, and irrigation system on its Border Control Point building to collect rainwater. Only 20 cubic metres of water can be extracted from the borehole each day, and in particularly dry periods, the site relies on mains water. Located in the Thames Valley area, the mains water is hard meaning it needs to be treated before it can be used on the crops. Building a pump house to treat the water cost around £30,000 and doesn’t include ongoing running and maintenance costs. Borehole water doesn’t require treatment but being limited to 20 cubic metres per day isn’t sufficient to cover such a vast site. An application to extract more water can be made, but the cost of application is £2,500 and with the greatest number of boreholes located in the Thames Valley, a licence is not guaranteed. The site is located close to a soft drinks company which has no or very little water usage restrictions in place.

*“We seem to move from too much to too little water. Normally, we turn our irrigation systems on in March, but this year, we had to switch on in early February. This is likely to become more common with climate change. We need water to continue doing business but there’s just no funding support available for environmental horticulture. If we’re going to continue providing the plants and trees that provide oxygen, capture carbon, and help to tackle climate change, then we need some support.”*

*“It’s also hugely important that government, local authorities, and the water industry get the messaging on water restrictions right. In May, we were told that a ‘hosepipe ban’ might be introduced in our area. The mere threat of a hosepipe ban cost our business £300,000 because of cancelled orders. A hosepipe ban isn’t an accurate description, but it has a massively negative impact on our sector, and it feels very targeted towards horticulture. Changing the terminology is a simple, practical ask, but it would make a massive difference.”*

#### **For more information & contact details**

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