

Scarce water?

There's plenty of rain in the UK in a typical year, and plenty of rivers that take the water back to the sea.

That does not mean we can relax about having an ample and good water supply. It still needs an industry to collect and process the water to the required standard, and to pipe it to homes and businesses on demand.

The authorities seem keener on regulating demand than on boosting supply. They rightly point out that some of the older pipes in the system are leaking, with quite high levels of suspected water loss in transmission. There are programmes to remedy this, but they can be very expensive as they usually entail digging up lots of roads and replacing miles of pipe, some of it still in good working condition. We need to decide a pace and realistic cost for moving to fewer leaks.

The authorities also like water meters. Charging people for what they use has its merits, and apparently produces a one off drop in water consumption as people adjust to the unit pricing of what they consume. Water meters help pin point leaking pipes on customer land and encourage water users to eliminate such waste by mending their own pipes.

When it comes to accepting that substantial rises in population requires more water, there remains a range of options. There is the possibility of cleaning up more waste water to a higher standard and re using it. There is the ability to put in desalination plants as there's huge quantities of water all around us in the sea. That is not about to run out. There is the opportunity to extract more water from natural aquifers. Finally there is the obvious possibility of simply storing more of the water from rivers when they are running high or in flood for the times when there is little or no rain and the rivers are running low.

It is not good practice to extract large quantities of water from rivers when they are running low in hot weather, and not a good idea to run down supplies in natural aquifers too much. Given the great growth of population and water use in London and the south east I do think we need to plan for a substantial new reservoir to add to the flexibility of our system and to improve our resilience in dry times. I am writing in support of the proposal for a major reservoir near Abingdon, which I would like to go ahead sooner, not later. The new reservoir over its long life would provide cheaper water than desalination and would also provide a place to take excess water in times of flood.