

Keswick Flood Action Group (K FAG) response to UU's Draft Drought Plan 2022 and Consultation meeting

K FAG would like to thank UU for holding the virtual open consultation meeting on their Draft Drought Plan 2022, held on 9th June 2021.

The draft document and the slides presented at the consultation show that UU have invested a substantial amount of resource into the development of their drought planning. This is appropriate given the significant consequences of drought for UU's customers, the legislative responsibilities that UU has to manage the risks, and the financial penalties that its regulators can impose if those responsibilities are not adequately discharged.

However, K FAG are concerned that the flip side of drought, flooding, does not seem to have a similar level of priority in terms of management of UU's resources. Flooding is acknowledged as a risk alongside drought in the executive summary of the Draft Drought Plan 2022 document:

“Although this region is relatively cooler and wetter than other parts of the U.K. (e.g. South East), droughts and other extreme events, such as floods, are a natural feature of the region's climate.”

K FAG acknowledges that the legislative frameworks and consequent regulatory responsibilities that UU has for drought and flood are different. However, when UU's resources have the proven capacity to significantly reduce flood risk to a community, as is the case for Thirlmere reservoir and Keswick, K FAG would expect that UU would take a proactive approach in managing that resource to balance both flood and drought risk.

In the past UU has been willing to consider such a balanced approach, with trials of the releases from Thirlmere at a scale that could create storm space in the reservoir (up to 700 ML/d) planned in 2010, 2013 and 2016, but for various reasons, not carried out. Recent requests from K FAG to increase releases prior to forecast storms above the “normal” maximum release of 140 ML/d have been refused. Even at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic and during the period of highest flood risk (February to March 2021) a temporary maximum of 200 ML/d was the most that UU would agree as a special “one-off” for that very limited period. That rate is far lower than the releases that UU were planning in 2010, 2013 and 2016 and is known to be insufficient to materially affect available storm space in the reservoir.

The Environment Agency, the primary regulator for flooding in England, have participated in all discussions since the 2005 Keswick flood about the capacity of Thirlmere to reduce flood risk to Keswick. An extensive modelling study, commissioned by the EA and reported in March 2021, concluded that:

“The operation of Thirlmere is not able to stop Keswick flooding in all events. However, it can make an appreciable difference to the average flood risk and make a significant difference (i.e. stopping flooding of residential properties or significantly reducing the number of properties affected) during some events.”

The EA is currently negotiating the renewal of the abstraction license for Thirlmere with UU and have told KFAG that it will include more flexibility to allow/require releases for flood risk reduction. In KFAG's view, if that flexibility does not include the scope of the "KFAG Memorandum" (circulated in February 2020), then it will be an opportunity missed and a dereliction of their duty to protect the people of Keswick.

The EA has previously shown it is willing to balance water resource, and therefore drought risk, to allow additional releases from Thirlmere to aid salmon and trout spawning in the St John's Beck (November/December 2016). KFAG believes that the EA has a duty to similarly balance flood and drought risk for the people of Keswick.

It is KFAG's expectation that UU and the EA will work together to ensure that the new abstraction license provides such a balance. This may need to include some form of indemnification for UU against any water loss due to flood risk mitigation releases which later impact on a drought. KFAG would fully support such a sensible compromise.

A copy of this email has also been sent to the EA.

Mark Roberts on behalf of Keswick Flood Action Group