

Water: The Forgotten Challenge

Fresh water is far scarcer than most of us realise — only a tiny fraction of the Earth's water is available for human use, and demand is rising fast. At Making A Green Impact May meeting, Terry Over gave a compelling talk on what he calls the forgotten challenge. The UK average is 142 litres per person per day, up from 85 litres in the 1960s, and by 2050 we will need 5 billion additional litres daily. Two thirds of the world's population already live under water stress — and the problem is coming closer to home, with the south-east of England already experiencing supply difficulties in dry summers.

Terry walked us through where household water actually goes — 30% to toilet flushing, only 4% to drinking — and made the striking point that our direct use is just 3% of our true water consumption. The other 97% is embedded in what we buy and eat. A pair of jeans takes 10,000 litres to produce; a cup of coffee 130 litres; bovine beef 15,415 litres per kilogram. Practical steps are available to all of us: water butts, aerator fittings, shorter showers, meter readings, and simply buying and eating less.

Terry also addressed the bigger picture with refreshing candour — the history of privatisation, the artificial suppression of bills that stored up today's infrastructure crisis, and the landmark Cunliffe Report (July 2025), which for the first time examined the whole system honestly, from Ofwat's failings to public overconsumption. His conclusion was optimistic: the problems are solvable, but they need a much broader national conversation — and it starts with each of us knowing how much water we actually use.