

INDUSTRY COMMENT

BOTTLED WATER, ON TAP

Water Direct and South West Water are pioneering an industry first: outsourced end-to-end bottled water station management.

More frequent extreme weather, ageing infrastructure and growing consumer demand are generating increasingly challenging obstacles to smooth service delivery across the UK water sector. When combined, these factors drive the requirement for Alternative Water Supply (AWS) solutions as a necessary service.

AWS deployment historically meant household customers were required to collect water from on-street bowsers; an onerous task during an already stressful situation. Today, water companies are turning to a more comprehensive and sophisticated set of solutions, including tankering operations to enable continuous supply when feasible, or bottled water deployment.

For Priority Services Register customers, the latter increasingly means doorstep delivery – a service Water Direct helped pioneer throughout the industry. For other customers, it typically means collecting bottled water from mass handout stations.

When deploying these handout stations, water companies face the challenge of rapidly organising and managing multiple stakeholders, including traffic management suppliers, hauliers, local government,

emergency services, and representatives of the commercial sites often used for such instances, such as supermarkets or sports facilities.

Water companies often also supply 'frontline' staff by seconding their own core personnel to physically distribute bottled water to customers. Whilst the spirit of 'volunteer' staff is commendable, this can stifle operational efficiency in the thick of a supply incident and introduce delays to finding and fixing the root issue and resuming normal service to customers.

Turnkey solution

In response to these challenges, South West Water and Water Direct have partnered to deliver the industry's first turnkey bottled water handout service. It will see South West Water utilise Water Direct's resources and expertise to design, manage and deliver all aspects of bottled water handout stations during planned and unplanned interruptions to the water supply. The scope includes tactical planning, pre-assessment of locations, site management, bottled water stock management, logistics and traffic management, alongside personnel resource planning and acquisition.

Chris Falconer, chief commercial officer at Water Direct, explained

Our first testing scenario took place in Cornwall earlier this month.



more: "We worked in partnership with South West Water to establish a delivery framework in 2023. Alongside developing our own operational processes, we have secured and tested the delivery of traffic management, welfare, security, and on-site operational support.

"We are now in the phase of actively interrogating those plans and our first testing scenario took place in Cornwall earlier this month (January) to simulate an outage and test the standard operating procedures (see picture). This was a full 'live' deployment to the other end of the country, to an unseen site with no prior briefing to the team.

"Onsite operations were led by two Water Direct site leads, who coordinated the rehearsal of three different deployment scenarios on the ground. The operation was simultaneously coordinated from our control centre in Essex, where the team conducted a remote site survey, and dispatched our assets, personnel, and third-party delivery partners.

"Prior to this, we spent several months working with South West Water, sharing knowledge, refining processes, and understanding potential challenges so that we have a solution that is as rounded and robust as possible, and scalable to any scenario...

"This model focuses on a coordinated response to deliver a seamless, end-to-end customer experience within hours of an outage, leaving our utility partners free to focus on restoring supply and managing communications."



Adam Johnson is CEO of Water Direct, which for nearly 30 years has been at the heart of the AWS market. This includes operating the UK's largest commercial fleet of tankers dedicated purely to potable drinking water and managing the Nationwide Bottled Water Bank™ service.

Collaborate to serve

In its latest five-year business plan (2025-30) plan, South West Water outlined a strategy to target risks and the Security and Emergency Measures Direction interventions, where enhanced capability of equipment and personnel, and adaptive pathways, would ensure a quicker reaction and more effective response to risks 'out of its control'.

The turnkey bottled water project recognises that brand and customer experience, combined with clear communication and a visible response in the field, are vital for building trust.

Mark Hillson, South West Water's drinking water services director, said: "Providing a first-class service to our customers is vital to us at all times and we are always looking for innovative ways to achieve this, so we are excited to explore how this industry-first collaboration can support us in achieving our goals.

"This project has the potential to improve our service by ensuring our customers receive faster and more accessible alternative water supplies during times of temporary disruption, while reducing the impact on our own workforce so our colleagues can focus fully on restoring mains water supplies."