2026 UK summer heatwave talking points

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This document is to help Quakers talking about the record summer heatwave in Britain, as part of our climate justice work.

Damage

The heat killed people. The Met Office and London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine estimated that 2,700 more people died because of the high temperatures in May and June. Around half of those were because of climate change, and around half would have happened in a naturally hot summer. Most of these deaths were frail older people. There were also more people drowning than usual as people swam in dangerous places to keep cool.

The heat **damaged the economy** too - Verdant research estimate losses of £4.4b May-July, mainly from people being less productive in high temperatures.

There were over 1,000 **wildfires** including in the Cairngorms, Arthur's Seat, Dunwich Heath, Stourbridge, the New Forest, and Blaenavon in Wales where peat caught fire underground and lasted for weeks. This is more than the previous record in 2025. In South Wales the fire control room got 2,000 calls on its busiest day, instead of the normal 200-300, and they ran out of fire engines and kit for firefighters.

The NHS had to cancel more than 1,000 operations because of the heat in May and June, mostly in London and the South East.

Carbon Brief found that many ambulance services' busiest days in the June heatwave were busier than the usual peak in the winter, and even the height of the Covid pandemic. London, South East Coast, South Central and North East ambulance services all reported new record days for responding to life-threatening emergencies during the June heatwave. 26 June was the busiest day with 4,000 life-threatening emergencies in England (the summer average is 2,500).

Government held a COBRA meeting on the emergency on 12 August, and sent an emergency heatwave warning on the nation's phones.

Harvests were hit 'Loud and clear, it's grim out there. I think it's as bad as it's ever been … Every record is being broken,' said Tom O'Malley from Nationwide wholesalers. It's heading for the worst year on record for arable crops (though not all of them, oilseed rape did well).

Cereal harvests are expected to be the lowest for 40 years, and livestock farmers have had less grass and needed to use their winter feed early.

Quakers in Britain | www.quaker.org.uk
Friends House, 173 Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ | T: 020 7663 1000 | E: enquiries@quaker.org.uk
Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) | Registered charity number 1127633

Records

Summer 2026 was the UK's hottest summer on record. Average temperatures from 1 June to 10 August were almost 2°C higher than the average year between 1991 and 2020. Temperatures reached 38°C in June and 35°C in July.

August was the hottest month since records began, worldwide, joint with July 2023.

2026 was the first year where temperatures in Britain hit 35 in May, and June, and July.

Drought. It didn't rain at Wisley in Surrey for 62 days, two whole months. That was the driest place, with Heathrow and Odiham in Hampshire the equal second driest with 56 days. (Compare this to 1976, when the driest place was Skokholm Island in Dyfed, with no rain for 51 days (and Wisley had 37 days with no rain). 70% of England was in drought in August 2026.

It was the driest July in England and Wales since records began in in 1836.