

URBAN AGENDA FOR THE EU



Water Sensitive City Thematic Partnership

DRAFT ACTION PLAN SUMMARY

March 2026





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**** The Pact of Amsterdam states that the Action Plan 'can be regarded as non-binding'. Therefore, the Actions presented in this Action Plan are not compulsory. ****
(chapter 4 clause 19.)

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A. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Water Sensitive City (WSC) Thematic Partnership focuses on embedding water sensitive design as the new standard for urban development across Europe. The Partnership **addresses the growing water-related challenges faced by cities of all sizes**, including flooding, drought, water scarcity, competing demands and declining water quality. It promotes a shift in perspective from viewing water as a problem to recognising it as a strategic resource that must be retained, efficiently used and prepared for reuse.

The objective of the Partnership is to support the development of an **implementation framework that integrates water sensitivity into urban planning, policy and investment at local, regional and EU levels**. By adopting a holistic approach, the WSC Partnership seeks to mainstream water across sectoral policies and ensure long-term climate resilience, environmental sustainability and inter-generational equity. In doing so, it contributes to Better Knowledge, Better Regulation and Better Funding under the Urban Agenda for the EU.

Launched in November 2024, the WSC Partnership operates in a dynamic policy context in which water resilience has become a strategic EU priority, reflected in the mid-term review of Cohesion Policy and the development of the EU Water Resilience Strategy (June 2025). The proposed Actions are therefore closely aligned with ongoing EU policy and funding processes, including the future Multiannual Financial Framework and the Urban Agenda for Cities.

The Partnership is coordinated by the Intermunicipal Community of the Coimbra Region (CIM-RC) and includes 23 partners: 2 national authorities, 8 urban authorities, 1 regional authority, 2 European umbrella organisations, 5 stakeholders and representatives from 4 European Commission DGs (REGIO, ENER, ENV, JRC) and SG REFORM.



Part of the members of the Water Sensitive City Partnership during the in-person meetings held in Coimbra (left) and Athens (right)

Following the preparation and presentation of the Orientation Paper (September 2025), the Partnership structured its work around **seven Actions covering indicators, enabling regulation, urban planning, innovative financing, digitalisation, knowledge and capacity building, and community engagement**. These Actions were developed through multi-level and multi-stakeholder cooperation, including exchanges with other UAEU Partnerships, and refined through consultation and dialogue with EU institutions.

Together, they aim to translate the Water Sensitive City concept into practical, scalable solutions that strengthen resilience, sustainability and climate adaptation in European cities.



Overview of WSC Partnership Actions



B. SUMMARY OF ACTIONS

Action 1 - Indicators for water sensitivity



Source: Pixabay

Brief description: This Action aims to develop a coherent and policy-aligned set of indicators to measure and monitor water sensitivity in European cities.

Main objectives

- Identify concise, comparable, harmonised and measurable indicators that enable cities to measure and improve their level of water sensitivity;
- Provide indicators that can be integrated in the next MFF and therefore advocate for the prioritisation of Water Sensitive City investments.

Implementation challenges

The indicator landscape related to water sensitivity is highly fragmented. Multiple EU frameworks, directives and resilience strategies coexist, each focusing on different aspects such as water quantity, quality, scarcity, technical solutions or governance. This fragmentation often results in siloed approaches and limits the translation of strategic objectives into coordinated action.

The main challenge is to guarantee the consolidation of fragmented information available into one coherent Set of Indicators that characterise a Water Sensitive City.

Outputs

- **Output 1:** Brief report on indicator groupings and status by Q4 2026
- **Output 2:** Synthesis report on Indicators by Q3 2027

Implementation strategy

Phase 1: Identifying existing EU regulations and frameworks with regards to water sensitivity and creation of a framework of indicators > January 2027

Phase 2: Integration of Final Indicators Set in the Framework for WSC Plan and Presentation of the outcomes to relevant partners, Member States, EU institutions > June 2027

Completion Date: June 2027

Action Leader: Gemeente Enschede

Partners:

- Elche City Council / Ajuntament d'Elx
- Aguas e Energia do Porto
- Municipality of Turin
- Cetaqua, Centro Tecnológico del Agua, Fundación Privada
- Acondicionamiento Tarrasense Asociación - LEITAT
- Resilient Cities Network
- DG ENV.



Action 2 - Enabling regulations



Source: European Union, Creative Commons CC BY 4.0, 2018

Brief description: This Action aims to use its local and field knowledge as well as case studies to encourage regulatory and policy changes that would enable the implementation of water-sensitive urban planning and investments across European cities. It will analyse gaps in planning, permitting and funding frameworks, and formulate recommendations to better embed water sensitivity into regulatory systems. The Action will provide practical guidance to improve legal certainty for cities, particularly regarding NbS, stormwater reuse and integrated water planning. It will also explore how EU financial instruments can better align with regulatory requirements to facilitate effective implementation of WSC approaches.

Main objectives

- Clarify compliance obligations, identify regulatory and funding bottlenecks, and translate EU and national legislation into actionable guidance for cities and regions
- Support cities and citizens with the conditions to accelerate a water-sensitive transformation and ensure that regulation and funding match actual urban needs.

Implementation challenges

Guaranteeing the alignment of multiple directives, national transpositions and funding regulations, and advocate for a consensus across Member States of the importance of Water Sensitive City investments.

Outputs

- **Output 3:** Synthesis report on regulatory mapping, inconsistencies and compliance framework by Q4 2026
- **Output 4:** Policy brief on policy development, alignment and funding by Q4 2027.

Implementation strategy

Phase 1: Develop an Analytical matrix of relevant EU & national legislation and Gap analysis identifying misalignments, inconsistencies, and enabling opportunities > December 2026

Phase 2: Present a case-study compilation on innovative financial schemes and integrate contributions from other Actions > July 2027

Phase 3 – Develop the Policy Brief with legislative and governance recommendations and disseminate its findings to share knowledge and gather further inputs > October 2027

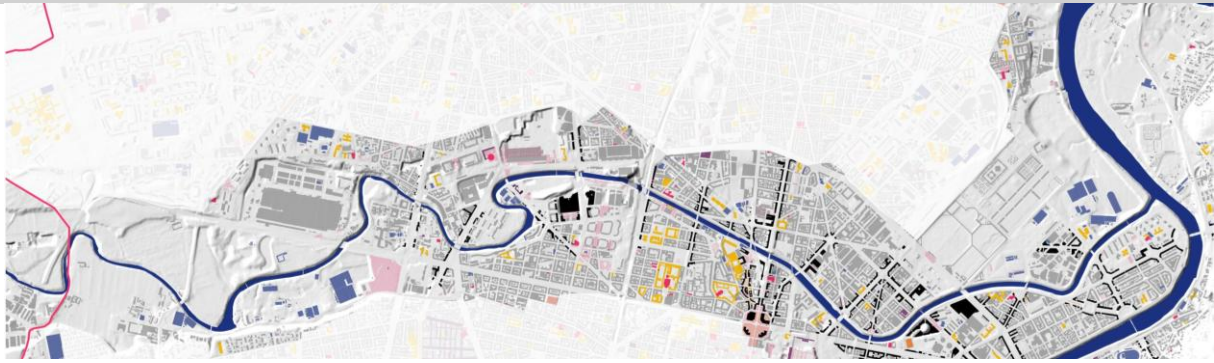
Completion Date: October 2027.

Action Leader: Ministry of Climate (Estonia)

Partners:

- Municipality of the Hague
- Cetaqua, Centro Tecnológico del Agua, Fundación Privada
- Council of European Municipalities and Regions – CEMR

Action 3 Urban planning framework



Source: Politecnico di Torino

Brief description: This Action supports cities in developing Water Sensitive City Plans (WSCPs) as integrated planning tools to address water-related risks, strengthen climate resilience and generate environmental and socio-economic co-benefits.

Main objectives

- Develop a structured roadmap for Water Sensitive City Plan preparation and implementation;
- Implement a Pilot testing to identify practical barriers, including challenges related to policy integration, governance coordination and implementation capacity;
- Provide cities with a clear, adaptable framework that embeds water sensitivity into spatial planning processes.

Implementation challenges

On one hand, the challenge is to guarantee the creation of a tool that can support local governments in integrating water into urban planning (through WSCPs), determining how well cities are presently performing and gaining a shared perspective on coordinated action going forward. On the other hand, the challenge is to advocate to EU institutions to the importance of the general adoption of this tool – the WSCP - in all EU cities.

Outputs

- **Output 5:** Pilot Testing Action of Water Sensitive Water Plan by Q4 2027
- **Output 6:** Roadmap on how to design a Water Sensitive City Plan by Q4 2027.

Implementation strategy

Phase 1: Designing the first version of the Water Sensitive City Plan (WSCP) with integration of Contributions from other Actions > March 2027

Phase 2: Providing technical support to the city that will Pilot the WSCP. This serves not only as a proof of the WSC Plan's credibility, but is also useful for providing additional knowledge, generating practical insights and informing a scale-up strategy of the WSC Plan > September 2027

Phase 3: Presenting the Final Roadmap for the WSCP > November 2027

Completion Date: November 2027.

Action Leader: Municipality of Turin

Partners:

- Gemeente Enschede
- Águas e Energia do Porto
- Municipality of The Hague
- Elche City Council / Ajuntament d'Elx
- Resilient Cities Network
- Major Development Agency Thessaloniki - Local Government Organization (MDAT S.A.)
- Roman municipality
- Commonsense Co-op
- Municipality of Chalandri.

Action 4- Innovative financing



Source: Pexels, photo by Saurabh Kumar

Brief description: This Action aims to catalyse investment in Water Sensitive Urban Design by identifying and promoting innovative and replicable financing models that complement existing funding sources. It will map mechanisms such as Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES), positive water or nature credits, Public-Private and Public-Private-Community Partnerships, blended finance and other emerging instruments, and translate them into practical guidance for cities.

Main objectives

- Explore synergies with EU initiatives, including the Sponge Facility, and partnerships with financial actors, including cooperation with the EIB, to support the scaling up of innovative solutions;
- Develop a compilation of European good practices and provide practical guidance tailored to municipalities of all sizes, improving their ability to plan and implement WSC projects.

Implementation challenges

Supporting the development of the necessary conditions for financial instruments to be integrated into EU and national investment frameworks, so that cities can adopt them.

Outputs

- **Output 7:** Publication with practical guidance and recommendations for municipalities by Q4 2027

Implementation strategy

Phase 1: Compilation of European good practices on innovative financing for WSUD with analytical overview of financing models and enabling factors > March 2027

Phase 2: Development of guidance and policy recommendations Policy brief on innovative financing in EU frameworks > July 2027

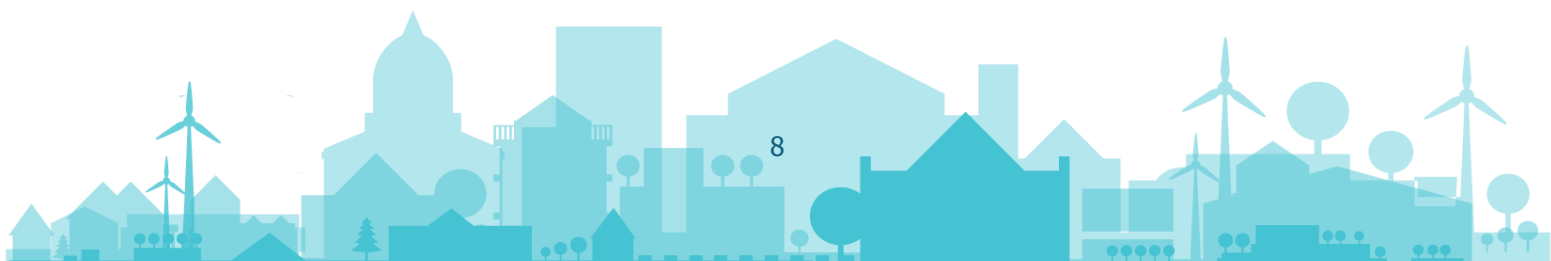
Phase 3: Publication with practical guidance and recommendations for municipalities > October 2027

Completion Date: October 2027.

Action Leader: CEMR

Partners:

- CETAQUA
- DG ENV and DG REGIO.



Action 5 - Stepwise water digitalisation standard



Source: European Union, 2025

Brief description: This Action aims to develop a segmented digitalisation standard (A1 to C2 levels) for urban water systems, covering key components such as treatment, distribution and stormwater management. The framework will help municipalities assess their compliance with EU water legislation, understand their digital maturity level and identify appropriate technological solutions linked to performance indicators.

Main objectives

- Support cities in assessing their digital maturity and provide solutions that support their advancement in the application of the standard;
- Advocate for a simplified funding strategy at EU level.

Implementation challenges

The main implementation challenge is designing a scalable, interoperable and regulation-aligned digitalisation pathway that is technically credible and adaptable to diverse municipal capacities across the EU. It is, indeed, a complex process to design a common, stepwise digitalisation framework that is sufficiently harmonised to support EU compliance and comparability, but flexible enough to remain applicable to small, medium and large municipalities.

Outputs

- **Output 8:** Development of implementation guidelines with related technological solutions by Q2 2027
- **Output 9:** Pilot Testing - Assessment of municipalities under the standard & recommendations for the Policy Brief by Q4 2027

Implementation strategy

Phase 1: Definition of the standard and guidelines and technological solutions > June 2027

Phase 2: In collaboration with water companies or municipalities make the assessment and indicate improvements to reach a higher digitalization level, directly related to indicators and technologies > September 2027

Phase 3: Present the conclusions from the Assessment and final contributions to the Policy Brief for EU > October 2027

Completion Date: November 2027.

Action Leader: Elche City Council / Ajuntament d'Elx (Spain)

Partners:

- Cetaqua, Centro Tecnológico del Agua, Fundación Privada (Spain)
- Viimsi Vallavalitsus (Estonia)
- Ministry of Regional Development (Czech Republic)
- Kalocsa Municipality (Hungary).

Action 6 - Knowledge and capacity building



Source: The green-blue Pinkeltjesplein project, CATCH Interreg North Sea Region project

Brief description: This Action functions as the horizontal backbone of the Plan, focusing on strengthening knowledge dissemination, institutional capacity and peer learning within the Partnership and beyond.

Main objectives

- Develop a Good Practice Compendium to support local and regional authorities in implementing water-sensitive approaches and integrating them into governance and planning processes;
- Based on a knowledge gap analysis and training needs assessment, develop targeted capacity-building materials, training modules and peer-to-peer learning activities;
- Ensure that findings and results of the WSC Partnership (including exchanges with other UAEU Thematic Partnerships, EU institutions and the EIB), are widely shared.

Implementation challenges

The main challenge lies in its strong dependency on the timely and substantive outputs of the other Actions, as the content of the Good Practices Compendium and the broader awareness-raising activities on the Water Sensitive City. Furthermore, ensuring meaningful participation from diverse local stakeholders requires sustained coordination, clear communication and the translation of technical outputs into accessible formats. The organisation of the final event and the preparation of a close-out report evaluating the overall impact of the Partnership's outputs and dissemination activities also present a coordination challenge.

Output

- **Output 10:** Good Practices Compendium by Q2 2027
- **Output 11:** Capacity Building Modules by Q4 2027

Implementation strategy

Pre-Phase: Development of a communication and dissemination plan > April 2026

Phase 1: Developing the mechanism to collect good practices on different topics and creating a final Compendium to be presented to European, National, Regional and Local Authorities > April 2027

Phase 2: Developing a knowledge gap analysis/training needs assessment and production of capacity-building materials and capacity-building training formats. It includes establishing synergies with related capacity-building initiatives at EU level (European Water Academy, EIT Water KIC, possibly EU Cities Platform) > October 2027

Post-Phase: Presenting a Close-Out Report to evaluate the overall impact of the TP work > December 2027

Completion Date: December 2027

Action Leader: Acondicionamiento Tarrasense Asociación - LEITAT

Partners:

- Viimsi Vallavalitsus
- Gemeente Enschede
- Municipality of Turin
- Council of European Municipalities and Regions - CEMR
- Ministry of Regional Development CZ
- Roman municipality
- Commonsense Co-op
- Municipality of Halandri (MoH)
- DG ENV
- JRC.

Action 7 - Community Engagement



Water Sensitive City Partners visiting the Hadrian Aqueduct in Chalandri

Brief description: This Action explores the ways in which citizens can contribute to the concept of a water sensitive city, with particular focus on how data-driven citizen science can activate communities and stakeholders to change their behaviour.

Main objectives

- Implement a Water-Sensitive City Community Challenge to test innovative engagement approaches, demonstrating how community involvement can contribute to measurable improvements in water management and urban sustainability;
- Disseminate an array of citizen and community engagement practices related to urban water issues to reflect the diversity of scales, scope, and impacts of active citizenship and social innovation in water-sensitive urban planning, and to serve as a guideline of alternative participatory methods for introducing and implementing WSC.

Implementation challenges

The main challenge lies in translating the Water-Sensitive City concept into concrete, measurable behavioural change through a data-driven citizen science approach. Designing a Community Challenge that is sufficiently attractive and engaging for citizens, while also generating reliable data and measurable impacts on water management practices, requires a careful balance between scientific robustness and accessibility. Ensuring that local authorities have the capacity, tools and motivation to adopt and implement the Challenge, particularly in municipalities with limited experience in participatory processes or behavioural interventions, is yet another challenge.

Outputs

- **Output 12:** Framework for Community Challenge and Toolbox for Communication by Q4 2026
- **Output 13:** Pilot Implementation of the Challenge and Evaluation by Q3 2027.

Implementation strategy

Phase 1: Creating a framework for a data driven, attractive and engaging challenge to increase water sensitive behaviour that local authorities and institutions in the EU can implement, as well as a Toolbox with attractive communicational and promotional materials > December 2026

Phase 2: Mapping good practices for participation and citizen engagement. The results of this Phase will be integrated in Output10 from Action 6 > April 2027

Phase 3: Supporting and supervising the pilot challenge implementation and final evaluation > September 2027

Completion Date: October 2027.

Action Leader: Gemeente Enschede

Partners:

- Municipality of Turin
- Elche City Council
- Municipality of Halandri
- LEITAT
- Commonsense Co-op
- JRC.