URBAN AGENDA FOR THE EU

# Water Sensitive City Thematic Partnership

## Draft Action Plan

March 2026

EUROPEAN URBAN INITIATIVE

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**Disclaimer:**

**** 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.)

Authors: WSC Thematic Partnership

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**Contact:** urbanagenda@urban-initiative.eu

## 1.1 Table of Acronyms

| Acronym | Full Name in English |
|---|---|
| AI | Artificial Intelligence |
| CAPs | Positive Water Credits (Credit Aqua Positive) |
| CEMR | Council of European Municipalities and Regions |
| CIM-RC | Intermunicipal Community of Coimbra Region |
| DG ENER | European Commission's Directorate General for Energy |
| DG ENVI | European Commission's Directorate General for Environment |
| DG EPL | European Commission's Directorate General for Employment |
| DG HOME | European Commission's Directorate General for Migration and Home Affairs |
| DG REGIO | European Commission's Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy |
| DG JRC | European Commission's Directorate General Joint Research Centre |
| DGUM | Directors General on Urban Matters |
| EAA | Ex-Ante assessment |
| EEA | European Environment Agency |
| EIB | European Investment Bank |
| EUI | European Urban Initiative |
| GDPR | General Data Protection Regulation |
| GIS | Geographical Information System |
| HGGI | Hybrid Grey-Green Infrastructures |
| ICT | Information and Communication Technology |
| IoT | Internet of Things |
| KPIs | Key Performance Indicators |
| NbS | Nature-Based Solutions |
| MFF | Multiannual Financial Framework |

| | |
|---|---|
| PES | Payments for Ecosystem Services |
| PPP | Public-Private Partnerships |
| PPCP | Public-Private-Community Partnerships |
| R&D | Research & Development |
| SDGs | Sustainable Development Goals |
| SG REFORM | Task Force for Reform and Investment |
| SuDS | Sustainable Drainage Systems |
| TA | Thematic Area |
| TP | Thematic Partnership |
| TPO | Thematic Partnership Officer |
| UAEU | Urban Agenda for the EU |
| UDG | Urban Development Group |
| UATPG | Urban Agenda Technical Preparatory Group |
| UWWTD | Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive |
| WFD | Water Framework Directive |
| WG | Working Group |
| WSC | Water Sensitive City |

# Definitions

## General Definitions

**Action Plan** is a document that (1) lists the specific Actions that need to be taken, as well as (2) the relationships between these Actions in order to achieve predefined goals in an integrated way. How the Actions complement and support each other to create synergy is an important part of the Action Plan.

**Actions** should address a real need, have real and visible impact and concern a larger number of Member States and cities. Actions should be new: no reiterated elements which have already been done or which would be done anyway. Actions should be ready to be implemented: clear, detailed and feasible; a study or a working group or a network is not considered an Action.

**Action Leader** is member of the UAEU Thematic Partnership who accepted to take the leading role in a certain group of members (of the Thematic Partnership) and guide them in the process of defining, drafting, developing and in the end implementing a specific Action of this Action Plan.

**Deadline** refers to the moment where the Action should take place in order to be meaningful. A deadline refers to a specific day and time.

**Outputs** refer to the products/deliverables resulting from the implementation of a certain action, activity, or process. Examples of outputs produced in the past (by other UAEU Partnerships) include reports, handbooks, video animations, courses, events, presentations, workshops, press releases, and other forms of external communication.

**Outcomes** are the impacts created by the use of the outputs. Examples of outcomes include increased awareness of a subject, closer cooperation between institutions, improved skills and knowledge, policy changes, enhanced community engagement, behavioural changes, and better decision-making processes.

**Recommendations** are meant to suggest good policies, good governance or good practices examples which could be used for inspiration. For instance, these can be projects that have already been implemented and that are considered successful. The aim of such recommendations is to encourage their mainstreaming (implementation at a wider scale) and transfer (implementation across more Member States and cities).

**Targeted stakeholders/governance level** is meant as the type of stakeholders or the level of governance (EU/ national/ local) to whom the Action is addressed, and where the results and outcomes of an Action should be implemented and used. To describe why a stakeholder/governance level should be involved means that the partnership evaluated the Action and reached the conclusion that an Action fits the purpose.

# Definitions specific for the topic of the Partnership

**Water-sensitive city** is a city that incorporates both built/technical aspects and management/behavioural considerations, viewing cities as catchments and aiming to restore the water balance within regions. This concept underscores the importance of ecological services derived from urban water systems, such as flood protection, groundwater recharge, and recreation. It emphasises collaborative efforts across governance levels for successful implementation[1].

**Nature based solutions** (NbS) refers to solutions that use or replicate natural processes to address environmental and social challenges, such as flood management or water purification. According to UNEP, nature-based solutions are actions to protect, conserve, restore, sustainably use and manage natural or modified terrestrial, freshwater, coastal and marine ecosystems which address social, economic and environmental challenges effectively and adaptively, while simultaneously providing human well-being, ecosystem services, resilience and biodiversity benefits[2].

**Sponge city** refers to a city designed to absorb, store, treat and reuse water through permeable surfaces, vegetation, and water retention systems.

**Water-sensitive urban design (WSUD)** refers to urban design which focuses on the water sensitivity of the area. Regarding drought, floods and general water availability for water in the area in relation to water use.

**Water-Energy-Food-Ecosystem Nexus** refers to the balance of water use between the energy and food sector and for ecosystems to create a balance which benefits all available participants.

**Blue Infrastructure** refers to infrastructure related to water management.

**Grey Infrastructure** refers to non-natural solutions with regards to water management, made from concrete.

**Equitable water allocation** refers to a water allocation which considers all (vulnerable) participants within society and allocates water in a manner which benefits the vulnerable participants of society or in an area (endangered (plant)species, nature reserves).

**Healthy soil** refers to a soil which has an open airy structure which allows for a good feeding ground for plants and other organisms. This also allows the soil to store water.

**Investments** refers to infrastructures and other type of capital investments that need to be executed to support the implementation of Water Sensitive Cities.

**Financing** refers to the sources of funding and financial mechanisms that must be secured to support the investments in Water Sensitive Cities.

[1] CATCH project - Interreg North Sea Region. Water Sensitive Cities Theory. https://northsearegion.eu/catch/water-sensitive-cities-theory/index.html

**Roadmap for a Water Sensitive City Plan** refers to a strategic, integrated framework that guides cities in sustainably managing water through nature-based solutions, circular systems, and resilient infrastructure, while aligning with climate, biodiversity, and urban development goals.

**Artificial Intelligence (AI)** refers to computer systems capable of performing complex tasks through algorithms that mimic human intelligence. It allows for automation of decision making, detecting patterns in data, among other tasks.

**Awareness** - knowledge that something exists, or understanding of a situation or subject at the present time based on information or experience.

**Barrier** to human change is an internal (psychological, emotional) or external (social, structural) obstacle that hinders, prevents, or makes it difficult for individuals to adopt new behaviours, mindsets, or routines.

**Behaviour change** refers to the process of modifying an individual's actions, habits, or responses, either temporarily or permanently.

**Capacity-building** refers to the process of developing and strengthening the knowledge, skills, tools, institutions, and resources that individuals, organizations, and communities need to effectively plan, implement, and sustain initiatives over time.

**Citizens and community participation** refers to the involvement of non-governmental actors, such as individual citizens, private enterprises, and public interest or business groups, in decision-making processes. It encompasses a range of activities, including mass public demonstrations, legal actions, opportunities to submit written comments, referenda, and participation through water user associations, among others. (Mostert 2003).

**Citizen science** is the practice of the general public actively participating in scientific research, often in collaboration with professional scientists, to generate new knowledge, analyse data, or monitor projects, ranging from observing wildlife to transcribing historical documents or even helping design research.

**Community Challenge Campaign** refers to an activation campaign aimed at executing a specific behaviour in which two or more parties challenge each other.

**Community engagement (in water)** refers to the community's knowledge of water and water management, the capacity to apply that knowledge, attitudes and values toward water reflected in personal and collective identity and opinions, and the active involvement of individuals in water-related behaviours and practices (Dean et al., 2016).

**Current operational status** reflects the present condition and functioning state of a system or process. In water sensitive cities, it relates to the current status of infrastructure, water quality and quantity, rainfall, electrical consumption or pressure, among other concepts.

**Cybersecurity** is the managerial element responsible of implementing measures to protect systems and data from digital threats, guaranteeing service continuity and protection from sabotage or private information exposure.

**Data analytics** the process of examining data sets through mathematical and statistical techniques to extract meaningful insights and conclusions. It allows clusterisation, pattern and correlation identification, improving decision making.

**Data protection** is the branch of cybersecurity responsible of sensitive data, either private data or data that can be used against a correct water management, through hardware and software that limit unauthorized access or breaches.

**Data set** is the collection, storing and sorting of related data points from different data sources for their usage and analysis.

**Data source** is the origin of data that is incorporated to data sets. These data points can be generated by digital equipment (such as sensors), surveys, work orders, among others.

**Data standardisation and harmonisation** is the process put in place to facilitate interoperability among data sets, converting them into consistent formats, facilitating their integration and unified analysis.

**Data validation** is the process of verifying data accuracy and reliability of data points and sets. It can be carried out automatically or manually and ensures coherence, concordance and exactitude.

**Data-driven** is the system or process that bases decisions and operations on data analysis and insights

**Data-sharing policies** are guidelines governing how information is distributed and accessed, avoiding unappropriated profiles to access data that can be considered sensitive. At the same time, they assure transparency in management. The EU Data Act defines data sharing policies.

**Digital Twin** reflects a virtual representation of physical assets - pumps, drainage systems, sustainable urban drainage systems (SuDS), nature-based solutions (NbS), water treatment plants - that receives real data inputs and simulates behaviours for an improved planning and decision-making.

**Digitalisation** is the process of transforming traditional infrastructures into smart systems by integrating technology, sensors, data collection, and computerised management systems. It includes both digital conversion of data gathering - water meter readings or work order generation - and process automation and data analytics.

**Driver for change** in a human context is an internal or external force, motive, or pressure that causes an individual or group to alter their behaviours, habits, mindsets, or routines. These drivers can be personal motivations (such as a desire for growth, health, or values) or external influences (such as social pressure, technology, economic conditions, or environmental factors) that force adaptation.

**Campaign framework** refers to a structured, evidence-based model used to design, implement, and evaluate communication campaigns aimed at changing people's behaviours.

**Geographical Information System (GIS)** is a software tool that captures, stores and analyses spatial and geographical information of various geolocated elements, as orography, urbanised areas, buildings, infrastructure, networks, parks, NbS, rivers, ravines, among many others.

**Incentive** refers to anything that persuades or motivates a person or organization to alter their behaviour to produce a desired outcome.

**Innovation** refers to the implementation of new ideas or methods to improve existing systems or processes.

**IoT devices,** acronym for Internet of Things. Connected devices that collect and transmit operational data (measurements, status, operational parameters) using internet connection, many times allowing for bidirectional communication for their remote operation. It encompasses, among others, water meters, sensors, leak detection devices or meteorological stations.

**Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)** are quantifiable metrics that, exposing synthesized information, measure system performance against specific objectives, allowing for an improved decision making and measurements of performance and effectiveness.

**Machine Learning** is the AI branch enabling systems to learn and improve from experience using data patterns.

**Operational resources** are the assets and tools - human resources, materials, energy, equipment and infrastructure - needed for the water system to properly reach a correct operational status, meeting the needs of the city and its citizens.

**Optimal system performance** refers to the most efficient and effective operational state of a system based on defined parameters.

**Participatory methods (in water management)** refer to a set of information-, consultation-, active involvement- and dialogue-based tools through which different target groups are engaged in water management processes, varying in degree of interaction, scale, and resource intensity (Jonsson, 2005).

**Payment for ecosystem services** refer to a variety of arrangements through which financial incentives are offered to actors to encourage them to not cause environmental harm (DG ENV, 2021).

**Positive water credits**, also known as CAPs (Credit Aqua Positive), represent the positive impact of projects that conserve and restore water resources.

**Physics-informed model r**efers to a mathematical model that incorporates physical laws and principles into data analysis increasing the accuracy of simulations and predictions.

**Predictive data model** is one that uses historical data and real-time monitoring to make a forecast future outcome of many magnitudes: demand, resource availability, water levels, among others. These models can also be used to predict future failure of equipment, detecting variations of their operational parameters, allowing the generation of predictive maintenance tasks.

**Preventive maintenance** is the collection of tasks that are carried out to prevent failure, based on a maintenance programming or based on data generated by different sources.

**Private data** is confidential information restricted to authorized users. It is regulated, at the EU level, by the rules developed in the GDPR.

**Real-time monitoring** refers to the continuous data collection and visualisation system that provides immediate information as it is captured.

**Research** is the systematic investigation to establish facts and develop conclusions.

**Smart Infrastructure** are systems enhanced with data collection and transmission capabilities for informed decision-making, improving efficiency, reliability and sustainability.

**Smart sensors** are advanced monitoring devices that collect and transmit physical or operational data automatically.

**Multiannual Financial Framework** (MFF) is the EU's long-term budget, powering its policies both within and beyond its borders over a seven-year period.

**Multilevel governance** is a system of policymaking and implementation in which responsibilities are shared and coordinated across different levels of government - local, regional, national, and supranational - often in collaboration with non-governmental stakeholders. As highlighted by the Common Provisions Regulation, 'interventions shall be coordinated and aligned between the different levels of governance concerned in the given territory, from programming to implementation and monitoring, with special attention to the involvement of relevant territorial authorities or bodies in project selection to ensure strategic consistency with local needs and challenges.[2]

**Public-private partnership** (PPP) is a cooperative arrangement between public authorities and private sector entities designed to finance, build, and operate projects or services that serve the public interest, leveraging complementary resources, expertise, and risk-sharing mechanisms.

**Public-private-community partnership** (PPCPs) is a variation of PPP 'in which the local community is one of the partners involved.[3]

**Quintuple Helix Model** is a collaborative innovation model involving five actors: academia, industry, government, civil society, and the natural environment.

[2] Regulation (EU) 2021/1060, Art. 29

[3] https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/public-private-community-partnership-ppcp/41499

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# 2 INTRODUCTION

## 2.1 Objectives of the Partnership

*Our aim is to help European cities become more resilient, more sustainable, and more climate-adapted – by putting water at the very heart of urban development.*

**As highlighted in its Orientation Paper[4], the WSC Thematic Partnership aims to make water sensitivity the new standard for urban development**, shifting the perspective from seeing water as a challenge to seeing it as a resource that needs to be retained, used as efficiently as possible and prepared for reuse. The Partnership aims to promote the relevance of water sensitivity beyond traditional water management, by promoting its integration into urban planning. This approach is expected to have a transformative impact on urban water management, as well as urban planning and design, while ensuring inter-generational equity and resilience to climate change. By adopting a holistic perspective, the Partnership will seek to support the mainstreaming of water into sectoral policies.

Launched in November 2024, the Urban Agenda for the EU Water Sensitive City (WSC) Partnership was established in a context in which cities of all sizes face increasing water-related challenges (excess, scarcity, competing demands). In response, the WSC Partnership envisions a future where European cities become more resilient, sustainable, and climate-adapted by placing water sensitive design at the heart of urban policies. This transformation will be driven by the **principles of a Water Sensitive City**, a city in which urban water management not only addresses functional needs but also enhances the overall urban environment, while ensuring intergenerational equity and resilience to climate change.

Reflecting the urgency of water-related challenges, the policy landscape is highly dynamic, with 'water resilience' identified as a strategic priority following the mid-term review of Cohesion Policy. The Water Sensitive City TP is also closely aligned with the EU-level policy development process, with a comprehensive Water Resilience Strategy launched in June 2025. Therefore, the proposed Actions were designed in close linkage with ongoing policy and funding initiatives, to ensure successful implementation and maximise their impact. Moreover, the Partnership will be closely following and providing input to the programming process of the next Multi-Annual Financial framework, as well as the implementation of the Urban Agenda for Cities.

**The Draft Action Plan offers a clear indication on how these objectives will be achieved, through seven complementary Actions.** The Actions focus on establishing harmonised indicators for water-sensitivity, enabling regulations, supporting the preparation of Water-Sensitive City Plans, promoting innovative financing models, developing a stepwise digitalisation framework for urban water systems, strengthening knowledge and capacity building, and fostering community engagement through citizen science.

[4] Orientation Paper of the Water Sensitive City Partnership, 2025. Link

# 2.2 Governance of the Partnership

## 2.2.1 Coordinator of the Partnership

The UAEU Water Sensitive City Partnership is coordinated by the **Intermunicipal Community of Coimbra Region (CIM-RC).** CIM-RC integrates 19 municipalities from three different districts in Portugal (Coimbra, Aveiro and Viseu).

## 2.2.2 Members of the Partnership

The UAEU Water Sensitive City Partnership includes **23 partners** representing 2 national authorities, 8 urban authorities, 1 regional authority, 2 European umbrella organisations, 5 other stakeholders, and the European Commission represented by 4 DGs (DG REGIO, DG ENER, DG ENV, DG JRC), SG REFORM. The full list of partners is presented below.

| National authorities | Regional authorities | Urban authorities | Umbrella organisations | Other stakeholders | EU institutions |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ministry of Regional Development (CZ) | Intermunicipal Community of Coimbra Region (PT) | The Hague Municipality (NL) | Council of European Municipalities and Regions - CEMR | Cetaqua, Centro Tecnológico del Agua (ES) | European Commission Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) |
| Ministry of Climate (EE) | | Turin Municipality (IT) | Resilient Cities Network | Águas e Energia do Porto (PT) | European Commission Directorate-General for Energy (DG ENER) |
| | | Enschede Municipality (NL) | | Acondicionamiento Tarrasense Asociación - LEITAT (ES) | European Commission Directorate-General for Environment (DG ENV) |
| | | Elche Municipality (ES) | | Major Development Agency Thessaloniki - Local Government Organisation (EL) | European Commission Directorate General for Joint Research Centre (JRC) |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Roman Municipality (RO) | | Commonspace Co-op (EL) | European Commission's Reform and Investment Task Force (SG REFORM) |
| | | Halandri Municipality (EL) | | | |
| | | Viimsi Municipality (EE) | | | |
| | | Kalocsa Municipality (HU) | | | |

### 2.2.3 Working method, process and timeline of the Partnership in defining the Action Plan

The initial phase of the Partnership (Jan. 2025 – July 2025) focused on the preparation of the **Orientation Paper**, following a structured and iterative process. This phase involved collective brainstorming and a gradual narrowing down of topics of interest, starting from an analysis of the priority themes identified in the relevant ex-ante assessment. Throughout the preparation of the Orientation Paper, Partnership members met regularly through a combination of online and in-person meetings. The Orientation Paper was finalised and formally presented at the Urban Development Group (UDG) meeting, held in Køge (Denmark) on September 17 2025.

Following the publishing of the Orientation Paper, the Partnership moved into the second phase, dedicated to identifying and defining Actions and develop the **Draft Action Plan.** Overall, during this second phase, which focused on the identification, prioritisation, and selection of actions, the Partnership convened several times in both online and physical formats to ensure consensus and coherence. Partners identified 7 Actions, which were developed under the coordination of an Action Leader, and Action Groups were formed. Between the monthly Partnership meetings with all partners and Coordinators, Action Groups met internally to refine the Actions, identify resources and relevant policy context, and decide on the implementation timeline. The proposed Actions were presented during an in-person meeting in December 2025 and subsequently discussed, refined, and consolidated through further exchanges within Action Groups, and following a Focus Meeting with representatives of the European Commission in January 2026. Moreover, the Partnership also engaged in exchanges with other UAEU Partnerships, to ensure synergies between Actions that are connected thematically and to facilitate learning (e.g. Greening Cities Partnership, Sustainable Tourism Partnership, Food Partnership).

The third phase continued with online meetings aimed at consolidating the content, clarifying responsibilities, and ensuring the readiness of the document for public consultation.

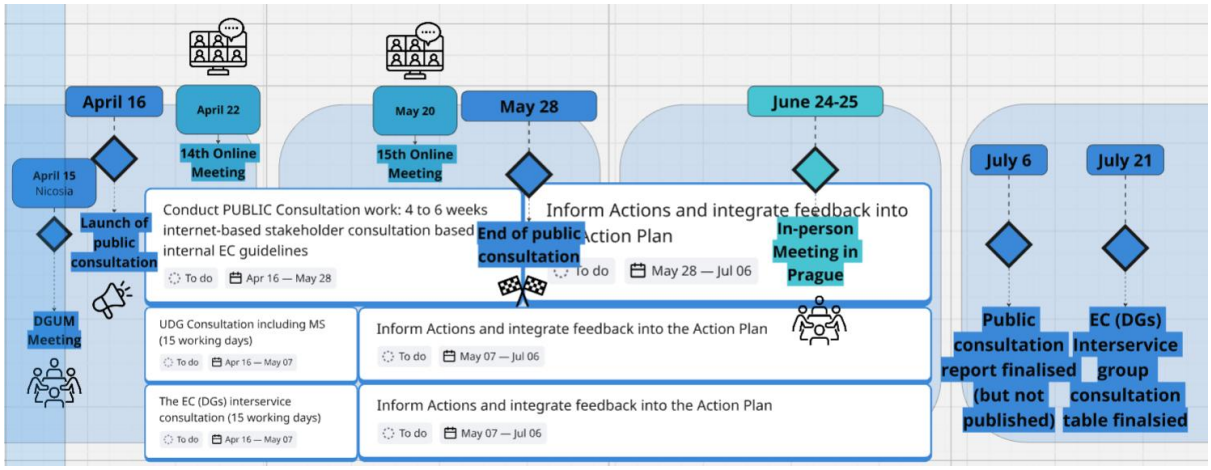
Following the launch of the consultation phase (April-May 2026), the Partnership will hold additional online and in-person meetings to review and integrate feedback received from stakeholders into the final version of the Action Plan, while also initiating the planning of preliminary implementation activities.

### 2.2.4 Consultations carried out during the development of the Action Plan

The consultation process for the Draft Action Plan will be carried out between **April 16 and May 28 2026** to gather feedback from a wide range of stakeholders, including EU institutions, Member States, urban authorities, EU networks, research institutions, private organisations, civil society, and other relevant stakeholders. The feedback gathered during this process will be analysed to refine the draft Action Plan and ensure its successful implementation.

- **The public consultation** process will collect responses a broad range of stakeholders through an online survey.
- **Feedback from Member States** and comments from the **European Commission Interservice Consultation process** will be integrated.

**Fig. 1. WSC Action Plan Consultation phase timeline**



### 2.2.5 Synergies with other Urban Agenda Partnerships and initiatives

During the preparation of the Action Plan, the Water Sensitive Cities TP has actively developed synergies with other Urban Agenda for the EU Thematic Partnerships and relevant European initiatives, with the objective of reinforcing mutual goals, avoiding duplication and fostering policy coherence.

Strong synergies have been established with the **Greening Cities Partnership**, particularly in relation to green and blue infrastructure, nature-based solutions and urban nature restoration. Close alignment is envisaged between the WSC Indicator Set and the Indicator System for Urban Nature Plans, as well as with methodologies supporting evidence-based planning and investment in urban green and blue infrastructure. This collaboration is ongoing and includes exchanges between Action Leaders and participation in joint meetings.

Collaboration with the **Food Partnership** was also reinforced, notably on urban land use, soil health, indicator development and capacity-building approaches. Opportunities for alignment exist in relation to indicator frameworks, training methodologies and governance models connecting water, food systems and land management.

**Sustainable Use of Land and Nature-Based Solutions Partnership** represent another key area of synergy, particularly regarding soil permeability, land take assessment and regulatory frameworks supporting NbS. These actions directly contribute to the WSC objectives of enhancing infiltration, reducing runoff and strengthening urban water resilience.

As referred in the Orientation Paper there are also opportunities for collaboration and knowledge exchange with other Thematic Partnerships, namely: Circular Economy, Energy Transition, Climate Adaptation, Building Decarbonisation, Public Procurement and Compact Cities.

At EU level, cooperation with Water Europe is being developed, notably on communication, innovation (e.g. Water-Oriented Living Labs) and joint advocacy on regulation and financing.

These synergies will be further strengthened during the Action Plan implementation phase.

# 3 ACTIONS

## 3.1 Overview table of Actions

| Nº | Title | Short Description |
|---|---|---|
| **1** | **Indicators for water sensitivity** | **This Action aims to develop a coherent and policy-aligned set of indicators to measure and monitor water sensitivity in European cities**.<br><br>Building on existing EU legislation, policy frameworks and other reporting systems, it will identify concise, comparable, harmonised and measurable indicators that enable cities to quantify their level of water sensitivity. The indicator framework will support evidence-based urban planning, performance monitoring and access to funding, while strengthening key performance indicators (KPIs). It will provide a foundational reference for Water-Sensitive City Plans, digital monitoring systems and long-term governance frameworks. The work includes a review of existing regulations, datasets and policy initiatives to ensure coherence and avoid duplication. |
| **2** | **Enabling regulations** | **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.**<br><br>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 nature-based solutions, 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 Water-Sensitive City approaches. |
| **3** | **Urban planning framework** | **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**.<br><br>It will develop a structured roadmap for WSCP preparation and implementation, integrating decentralised water management, nature-based solutions and water accounting principles. Pilot testing will be carried out to identify practical barriers, including challenges related to policy integration, governance coordination and implementation capacity. The Action aims to provide cities with a clear, adaptable framework that embeds water sensitivity into spatial planning processes. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **4** | **Innovative financing** | **This Action aims to help cities identify and adopt innovative financing models that can complement funding available through national and EU programming**.<br><br>It will convert these financing mechanisms into practical guidance tailored to municipalities of all sizes, improving their ability to plan and implement WSC projects. |
| **5** | **Stepwise water digitalisation standard** | **This Action aims to develop a structured and stepwise digitalisation framework for urban water systems, covering key components such as treatment, distribution and stormwater management.**<br><br>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. Another objective is to advocate to a simplified funding strategy at EU level. |
| **6** | **Knowledge and capacity building** | **This Action focuses on strengthening knowledge dissemination, institutional capacity and peer learning within the Partnership and beyond**.<br><br>Based on a knowledge gap analysis and training needs assessment, it will develop targeted capacity-building materials, training modules and peer-to-peer learning activities. Drawing on best practices and the outputs of other Actions, it will support local and regional authorities in implementing water-sensitive approaches and integrating them into governance and planning processes. Also, this Action will deliver and roll out of a communication, training and dissemination plan for all other Actions. |
| **7** | **Community Engagement** | **This Action explores the contribution of data driven citizen science to activate communities and stakeholders to change their behaviour.**<br><br>It will explore the role of citizen science and behavioural change strategies in supporting water resilience at local level. A Water-Sensitive City Community Challenge will serve as a proof of concept to test innovative engagement approaches, demonstrating how community involvement can contribute to measurable improvements in water management and urban sustainability. |

## 3.2 Integration of Actions

**The Action Plan is designed as an integrated framework in which each Action reinforces and builds upon the others, ensuring coherence between technical tools, regulatory improvements, financing mechanisms and stakeholder engagement.**

Action 1 (Indicators for Water Sensitivity) will directly inform Action 3 (Urban Planning Framework), serving as a core reference for the Roadmap to design Water-Sensitive City Plans. These indicators will be the starting point for every city's water sensitive transition journey, providing a clear understanding of city's current water system.

Action 2 (Enabling Regulations) translates local experience and pilot findings into policy recommendations. Output 4 (Policy Brief) will integrate insights from Action 4 (Innovative Financing) and Action 5 (Stepwise Water Digitalisation Standard), ensuring that regulatory proposals are aligned with investment needs and digital compliance requirements. This creates coherence between governance, financing and technological development.

Action 3 operationalises the framework by testing Water-Sensitive City Plans in practice. Its final Roadmap will incorporate guidance from Action 4 (Output 7 on innovative financing), and Action 6 (Output 10 Good Practices Compendium) ensuring that planning frameworks are financially feasible and investment ready.

Action 5 supports implementation through digital monitoring and compliance tools, closely linked to the indicators from Action 1 and contributing to simplified funding strategies.

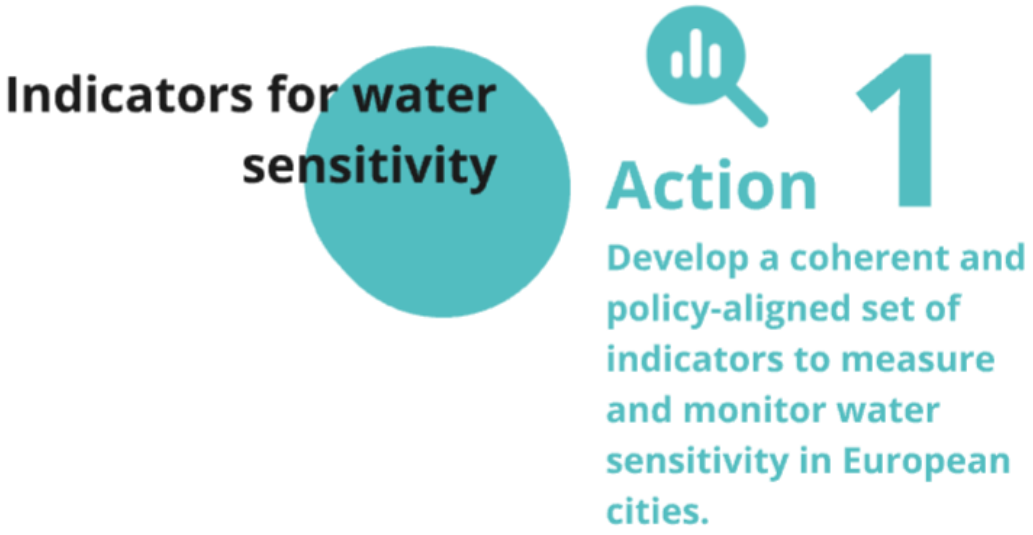
Action 6 (Knowledge and Capacity Building) functions as the horizontal backbone of the Plan. Output 10 (Good Practices Compendium) integrates examples from Innovative Financing (Action 4) and Community Engagement (Action 7), while its communication and dissemination activities ensure that findings, including exchanges with other Thematic Partnerships, EU institutions and the EIB, are widely shared.

Finally, Action 7 strengthens societal uptake by testing participatory approaches that complement technical and planning tools.

Together, the Actions form a coherent pathway from measurement and regulation to planning, financing, digitalisation, capacity-building and citizen engagement, ensuring that the Water Sensitive City concept is translated into practical and scalable implementation.

**Fig. 2 WSC Actions overview**

## 3.3 Action N° 01 – Indicators for water sensitivity




**This Action aims to identify and propose indicators for measuring and understanding the water sensitivity performance by European cities. It will focus on existing policies, legislation and new initiatives to measure and quantify the water sensitivity of a city. We will provide a framework for identifying water sensitivity, using concise, tangible and measurable indicators to create a foundation for urban planning, securing funding, engaging communities and improving KPIs. The indicators will provide the groundwork for the creation of urban planning documents (Action 3), smart digital systems (Action 5) and monitoring plans of water sensitivity. The work will include an analysis of existing regulations and policy briefs.**

**Targeted stakeholders/governance level**: EU Commission, National, Regional and Local Public Authorities

**Deadline:** June 2027

### 3.3.1 Which of the three pillars is this Action contributing to?

| Action 1: Relevance to the 3 Pillars of the UAEU | |
|---|---|
|  Better regulation | Providing a framework for interpretation and translation of regulation into tangible indicators to measure water sensitivity and other KPIs. **20%** |
|  Better funding | The framework for measuring water sensitivity provides direction and quantification of need for infrastructure. By suppling key indicators for measuring water sensitivity the need for funding becomes concrete, increasing the possibilities for private funding initiatives. **5-10%** |
|  Better knowledge | Improve the understanding of water sensitivity by providing a framework of indicators to measure and understand the water sensitivity problems of a city. **70-75 %** |

### 3.3.2 What is the specific problem this Action is aiming to address?

A Water Sensitive City is a city that is resilient, liveable, productive and sustainable, where water is managed as an integral part of urban systems. This Action aims to **develop a coherent indicator set that enables cities and regions to quantify, assess and monitor their level of water sensitivity in a consistent and comparable way.**

Indicators are essential to track progress over time, assess system performance and support evidence-based planning, policy-making and governance. They also facilitate access to funding by providing measurable benchmarks to guide investment decisions and demonstrate impact. By establishing a common indicator framework, water sensitivity becomes a measurable and operational concept for urban development.

**At present, 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.

While many indicators already exist for specific dimensions of water management, they are often context-specific. This Action will therefore focus on grouping, aligning and prioritising existing indicators, identifying a core set that is strategically relevant, measurable and feasible to implement across different urban contexts.

In line with the European Commission's Water Resilience Strategy, particular attention will be given to **water scarcity**, an area where comprehensive and comparable indicators remain limited. The indicator set will be adaptable to different contexts, covering nature-based, technical and societal responses to water stress and extreme events, while supporting comparability and policy alignment across Europe.

### 3.3.3 Which existing EU policies, legislations or instruments are relevant for this Action?

Key EU policies and frameworks already provide a strong foundation for measuring and monitoring urban water performance and are therefore highly relevant for this Action. These include the Water Framework Directive, the Floods Directive, the revised Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive, the Nature Restoration Regulation, the European Green Deal, and the emerging EU Water Resilience Strategy, all of which define objectives, obligations and reporting requirements related to water quality, quantity, risk management and ecosystem protection.

Several EU data and monitoring instruments are also directly relevant. Eurostat already collects harmonised water-related data reported by all Member States, offering a valuable baseline that this Action will build upon to avoid duplication and improve usability for cities. The Green City Accord provides a particularly relevant reference, as it includes concrete urban water indicators such as compliance with the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive and domestic water consumption.

Synergies will also be explored with the Circular Cities and Regions Initiative (self-assessment framework for circular economy actions) and DG Environment, within the Working Group on Drought and Water Scarcity, which is contributing to improved approaches for monitoring water stress and resilience.

By aligning these existing policies, datasets and initiatives, Action 1 aims to deliver a coherent, practical and policy-aligned indicator framework to support urban planning, governance, monitoring and investment decisions.

### 3.3.4 Why is this Action needed?

**This Action is needed to create a coherent common set of indicators which determine if a city is water sensitive.** Current indicators are fragmented and in a variable state of level of detail. The coherence, relevancy and impact of an indicator or indicator group is one of the key pillars in enabling a water sensitive city. Creating such a coherence in indicators will provide the necessary tools for municipalities, cities or other regional governmental entities to determine the impact of water sensitivity on their city.

**In the absence of shared and commonly agreed indicators, effective public policy cannot be established, resulting in surface level discourse**. Enhancing the strategic dimension, by creating a common framework will enhance this contribution to a

coherent policy, rather than presenting it as a set of isolated measures. Developing a unified set of indicators is therefore essential, as they enable the assessment and demonstration of the impact of actionable pathways toward a water sensitive city, support access to funding opportunities, strengthen city planning and enhance accountability. Furthermore, such indicators facilitate clearer communication of the actions undertaken on a policy level closing the loop of building a resilient and adaptive urban environment.

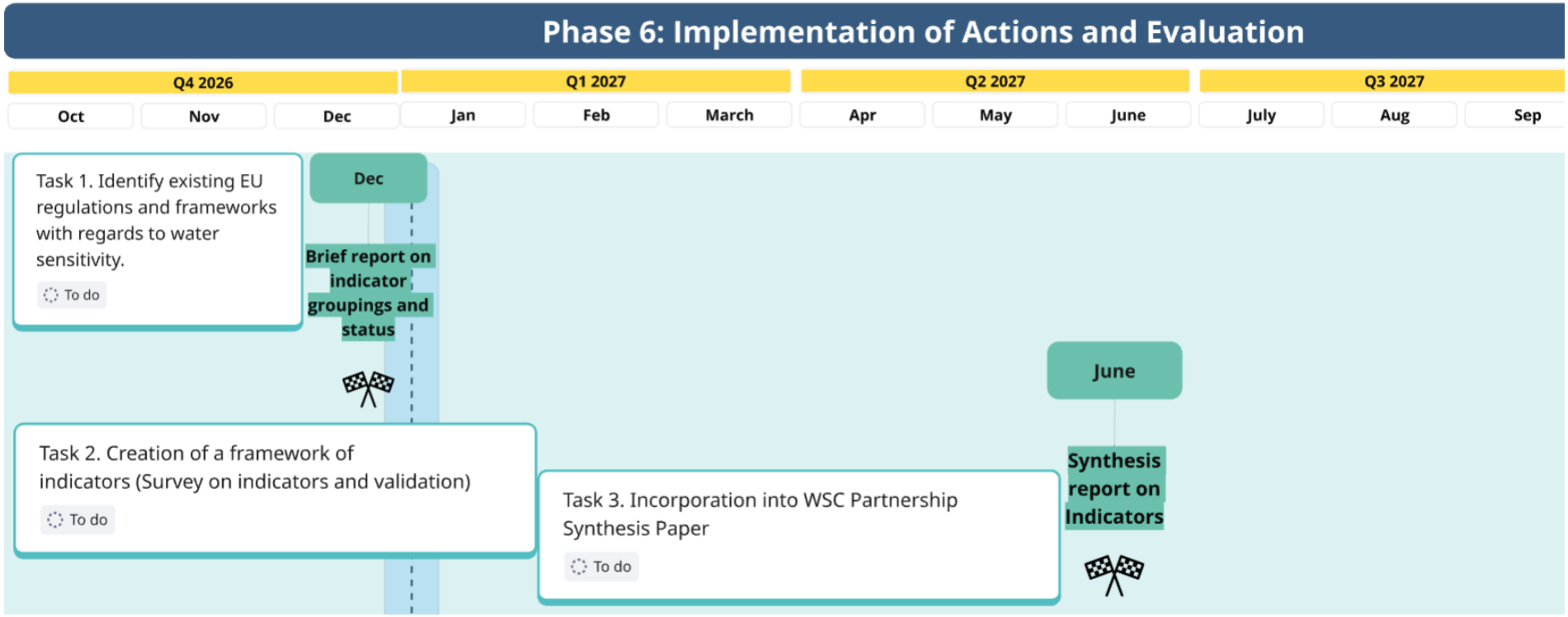
### 3.3.5 How will the Action be implemented?

Action 1 will provide a translation of existing regulation, policy and position papers on water sensitivity into a framework of indicators. At present the landscape for measuring the water sensitivity of a city is fragmented. Operationalization of this framework requires grouping, aligning and prioritisation of existing indicators into a core set which is regulatory and strategically relevant.

**Table of tasks, sub-tasks and outputs**

| Task | Description / Sub-tasks | Outputs |
|---|---|---|
| **TASK 1: Identify existing EU regulations and frameworks with regards to water sensitivity.** | • **Analytical grouping of existing indicators (external expertise)**<br>• **Structured database of indicator groups, prioritisation and missing indicators**<br>• **Internal validation** | **Output 1: Brief report on indicator groupings and status**<br>Deadline: by Dec. 2026 |
| **TASK 2: Creation of a framework of indicators** | **2.1 Survey on indicators, frameworks grouping and gap identification**<br>**2.2 Validation of indicators** | **Survey on indicators**<br>Deadline: by Jan. 2027 |
| **TASK 3: Incorporation into WSC Partnership Synthesis Paper** | **3.1 Integration framework into WSC paper**<br>**3.2 Presentation on relevant cooperation partners, member states authorities, EU institutions.** | **Output 2: Synthesis report on Indicators**<br>Deadline: by Jun. 2027 |

**Fig. 3 Implementation timeline for Action 1**



### 3.3.6 What resources are needed?

Implementation of this Action will require a combination of coordination capacity internally within the partnership as well as externally to perform workshops and surveys regarding the indicators. The internal capacity will require a moderate commitment over its duration, which is a combination of attendance during meetings and delivering input during the grouping and analysis phase. The focus meetings will be used to align the output form Action 1 with the other Actions within the Partnership. The run-time of this particular Action will be dedicated and short, where the time commitment will be front loaded within the Action.

- *Task 1.1 Analytical grouping of existing indicators* will be supported by external expertise along with input from the Action Group through focus meetings. It will also entail aligning the output from the external expertise with the relevant Actions and groupings within the Partnership.

- *Task 1.2 Structured database of indicator groups, prioritisation and missing indicators* and *1.3 Internal validation* are the core part of this Action and will require the largest commitment from the Action Group members. This includes staff time from urban planners, policy experts and experts. The refinement of the Action may require further external expertise.

- *Task 2.1 Survey on indicators, frameworks grouping and gap identification* and *2.2 Validation of indicators* will require organisation and dissemination capacity. The quality of this task depends on the reach of the survey (the further the reach of the survey, the larger internal capacity is needed).

- *Task 3.1 Integration framework into WSC paper* and *3.2 Presentation on relevant cooperation partners, member states authorities, EU institutions* require internal coordination capacity. Integration of the Action within the other Actions of the Partnership will require time for coordination and implementation. The specific composition of the Action Group, having multiple Action Leaders as members, will aid this process.

Financial resources are needed for external expertise contracts, facilitation of the survey and accessory administrative support. No additional financial resources are foreseen.

### 3.3.7 Are there any foreseen risks?

The timeline for this Action is ambitious, and potential delays represent a key risk. Delivering a robust and agreed indicator set requires close coordination within the Action Group, with other ongoing activities (presented in 2.13), and timely input from external experts. Any delay in this Action could affect the delivery schedule of other Actions, as the indicator set developed is a foundational output that directly informs other Actions. Delays or changes in scope may impact Action 3 (Urban Planning Framework), which relies on indicators to guide planning and monitoring, as well as Action 6 (Knowledge and Capacity

Building) and Action 7 (Community Engagement), which depend on clear, communicable and usable indicators for training, awareness-raising and stakeholder involvement.
Additional risks include:

- **Misalignment with local contexts**, where indicator sets or thematic areas may not adequately reflect diverse territorial, climatic or socio-economic conditions.
- **Variable levels of technical capacity** within municipalities, potentially affecting correct interpretation, implementation and use of the indicators.
- **Over-generalisation of indicators**, leading to reduced applicability due to cultural, social or geographical differences, particularly in relation to social and behavioural indicators.
- **Too detailed indicators, leading to an (excessively) large collection of indicators.** Proliferating the current problems with indicators, creating a large unrefined set of indicators, which do not share a consensus.
- **Conflicting national guidelines or regulatory requirements,** which may limit comparability or create implementation barriers at local level.
- **Insufficient engagement of key stakeholders and competent authorities**, including national and urban-level actors, reducing legitimacy and uptake of the indicators.

**Mitigation measures:** These risks will be mitigated through phased development, stakeholder involvement, alignment with existing EU frameworks, and continuous coordination with related Actions to ensure coherence, usability and impact across the Action Plan.

### 3.3.8 Which members of the UAEU Partnership will be involved in implementation of the Action?

**Action Leader:**

- **Gemeente Enschede**

**Contributing partners:**

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

### 3.3.9 Territorial Impact Assessment

A Territorial Impact Assessment (TIA) report on the Water Resilience Strategy was recently published by the European Committee of the Regions – see more details under Action 2 – Enabling Regulations. This assessment is particularly relevant, as it analyses differentiated territorial impacts of European policies. It provides evidence that can also inform the design and implementation of this Action. Therefore, its implications and recommendations will be carefully considered.

With regard to the primary objectives of Territorial Impact Assessment, this Action does not introduce measures that would generate differentiated legal, financial, or administrative territorial effects, nor does it impose additional compliance burdens on specific territories. Therefore, a Territorial Impact Assessment is not required.

However, in relation to the TIA for the Water Resilience Strategy, particular attention is given to the risk-based cluster approach followed by this Action. Section 2.1.10 analyses how this approach may help reduce spatial imbalances by addressing territorial differences and vulnerabilities, as well as the potential risks to its effective contribution in line with TIA principles.

### 3.3.10 Are you aware of any existing Territorial Impact Assessment in relation to certain EU legislative initiatives, which may be relevant for this Action?

EU legislation, policies, and programmes may produce differentiated effects across various places and territorial typologies. Potentially generating disparities between urban and rural areas, uneven regional implementation capacities, or structural advantages for well-resourced territories. Territorial Impact Assessments evaluate these potential variations by employing qualitative and quantitative methodologies to determine which territories face the greatest exposure to beneficial or adverse impacts, ultimately enabling more informed policy formulation and execution.

As mentioned in section 2.1.9, the risk-related clusterisation approach aims to reduce spatial imbalances in the implementation of the Action plan. The success of this approach depends on well-defined clusters that include the most representative indicators interrelated to specific themes, genuinely reflecting territorial realities, while maintaining flexibility to incorporate more specific risk-related indicators that cannot be evaluated by all cities.

Although this approach appears to reduce these imbalances, three main territorial imbalances warrant attention, as they may present difficulties in implementation. These imbalances are driven by:

- **Economic disparities**: Wealthier cities and regions have greater financial and administrative capacity to invest in data collection infrastructure, monitoring systems, and technical expertise needed to implement sophisticated water sensitivity indicators. While economically disadvantaged areas may struggle with

basic implementation costs, as other priorities take precedence over investment in data collection systems, equipment and administrative resources necessary for this task.

- **Technical and institutional capacity gaps**: Regions or cities with limited administrative capacity, fewer qualified personnel, or weaker institutional frameworks may be unable to effectively measure, report and act on the indicators, creating a performance gap. This is partially related to the previous point, as wealthier cities or regions are more developed in terms of technical and institutional capacities compared to cities or regions with greater economic constraints. Additionally, wealthier cities or regions can allocate budget and resources to data measurement and indicator monitoring, as justification for spending these resources becomes more important.
- Compartmentalization of disciplines: Across different contexts, responsibilities for water management are shaped by varying institutional settings, which may limit local administrative bodies' access to technical expertise and mandates. Insufficient in-house expertise or inadequate collaboration with specialized actors can hinder the effective introduction, measurement, and monitoring of indicators.

The identified risks can be mitigated through the comprehensive implementation of the Action Plan itself, as several Actions address measures to cover these two imbalances based on the development level of community or regional capacities (Actions 5 and 6), their funding capacity (Action 4), and the possibility of new investments that will generate new insights and information where current gaps exist, within the corresponding European framework for approaching these Actions (Actions 2 and 3). Nevertheless, as mentioned in section 2.1.7, the indicators feed into different Actions; thus, weaknesses related to indicators can be addressed across the various Actions.

### 3.3.11 Are there any EU legislative initiatives or proposals that may result in considerable spatial imbalances, which are relevant for this Action?

Some EU legislative initiatives can result in spatial imbalances in the application of the Action, as they feed into its implementation. Regarding this aspect, the following EU legislative initiatives are particularly relevant for calculating indicators as they require extensive field data collection and analytical capacity:

- **Water Framework Directive (WFD)**: The WFD mandates comprehensive monitoring of water body status through regular field sampling, laboratory analysis, and ecological assessments. This creates spatial imbalances as larger cities leverage existing monitoring networks to collect required data cost-effectively, while smaller municipalities must outsource sampling and analysis at higher per-sample costs. Resource-constrained territories cannot systematically measure water sensitivity or demonstrate WFD compliance.

- **Floods Directive**: This directive requires flood risk assessments based on hydrological modeling and spatial mapping. Well-resourced cities have access to tools and professionals for implementing the Directive and obtaining flood indicators, while smaller municipalities lack technical expertise for hydraulic calculations and face substantially higher per-capita costs for external consultants, or must apply for funding to perform these tasks, delaying their implementation of the directive and consequently impacting related indicators.

- **Revised Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive (UWWTD)**: This directive requires detailed monitoring of wastewater treatment performance, effluent quality, and receiving water body impacts, necessitating regular sampling and analysis of influent/effluent parameters. Indicators related to this area could be imbalanced with regard to cities with economic capacity for implementing the directive versus smaller cities with fewer resources, potentially not reflecting the reality of less-resourced municipalities.

The different legislations presented above share a common factor: data for calculating indicators depends on differences between cities regarding development level and implementation capacity. These legislative frameworks must address these inequities to avoid misbalancing the Action's implementation.

## 3.4 Action N° 02 – Enabling Regulations


**This Action aims to identify and propose regulatory and policy changes, including regulation on public funding that enable the implementation of water-sensitive urban planning and investments across European cities.**

- **Align regulations with WSC concept:** Identify gaps and propose coherent EU–national rules that embed water sensitivity in planning and permitting.
- **Reduce legal uncertainty for cities**: Provide clear, practical guidance to enable NbS, stormwater reuse and integrated water plans.
- **Link regulation with funding:** Recommend adjustments so EU financial instruments better support WSC implementation.

The Action will focus on aligning national and EU-level regulatory frameworks with the Water Resilience Strategy, Water Framework Directive, and the revised Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive, and on removing barriers that currently prevent nature-based, circular, and water-efficient solutions from being mainstreamed in urban contexts.

Furthermore, based on existing knowledge, this Action will identify and propose regulatory and policy changes, including regulation on public funding, that enable the implementation of water-sensitive urban planning and investments across EU cities. It will focus on aligning national and EU-level regulatory frameworks with the Water Resilience Strategy, Water Framework Directive, and the revised Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive, and on removing barriers that currently prevent nature-based, circular, and water-efficient solutions from being mainstreamed in urban contexts. In parallel, the Action will promote regulatory approaches that strengthen coordination across levels of governance and traditionally fragmented sectors (e.g. urban planning, health, environment), foster the synchronisation of directives and strategies and the development of integrated plans

(urban plans, RBMPs, climate and health), and mainstream water as a core investment criterion across funding programmes, thereby accelerating implementation on the ground.

The work will include drafting targeted policy briefs, analysing the current funding and forthcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and other relevant funding regulations, and preparing recommendations to integrate water sensitivity into upcoming EU and national legislation and funding programmes.

**Targeted stakeholders/governance level:** EU level institutions, at national level ministries, national agencies or relevant authorities, at regional level managing authorities, regional level authorities, at local level local government, authorities dealing with water,

**Deadline:** Synthesis report on regulatory mapping, inconsistencies and compliance framework by December 2026, policy brief on policy development, alignment and funding by October 2027.

### 3.4.1 Which of the three pillars is this Action contributing to?

| Action 2: Relevance to the 3 Pillars of the UAEU | |
|---|---|
|  Better regulation | Provide concrete recommendations for harmonising and strengthening EU and national regulatory frameworks to support water-sensitive design and multi-level water governance. **60%** |
|  Better funding | Advocate for the inclusion of dedicated support for water-sensitive city investments in the MFF and other relevant funding regulations; promote easier access to funding for municipalities. **30%** |
|  Better knowledge | Improve understanding of how existing EU directives and regulations interact, by compiling a clear overview of water-related legal provisions, indicators, and compliance requirements for cities. **10%** |

### 3.4.2 What is the specific problem this Action is aiming to address?

At EU level, the **concept of Water Sensitive City (WSC)** has been formalized through the launch of the WSC Partnership under the Urban Agenda in 2024 and, as such, no specific WSC regulation exists at present. The ex-ante assessment noted that a wide range of EU and national policies already provide direction, funding and knowledge support for water-sensitive approaches, but they are still organized in separate sectoral silos -water, climate, land use, energy and cohesion- with limited horizontal integration and only partial translation into binding urban-planning and building requirements.

As a result, the EU framework remains fragmented into separate sectoral obligations rather than articulated as a unified mandate, and it does not by itself ensure that municipalities systematically embed WSC principles in their urban design and investment decisions. Moreover, cities often face legal **uncertainty and administrative barriers** when introducing nature-based solutions, stormwater reuse, or integrated water plans.

On the funding side, the current situation mirrors this fragmentation: multiple major EU instruments (notably Cohesion Policy funds, Horizon Europe, LIFE, Interreg, the European Urban Initiative and other programmes) and associated national schemes can already support WSC-type measures, but resources are dispersed across separate thematic programmes, operated under different rules and often managed at Member State or regional level, making the landscape complex and difficult for cities to navigate. There is also **limited guidance** on how funding instruments can better serve these regulatory goals.

Moreover, more attention should be given to **international cooperation** to effectively address challenges related to cross border water management.

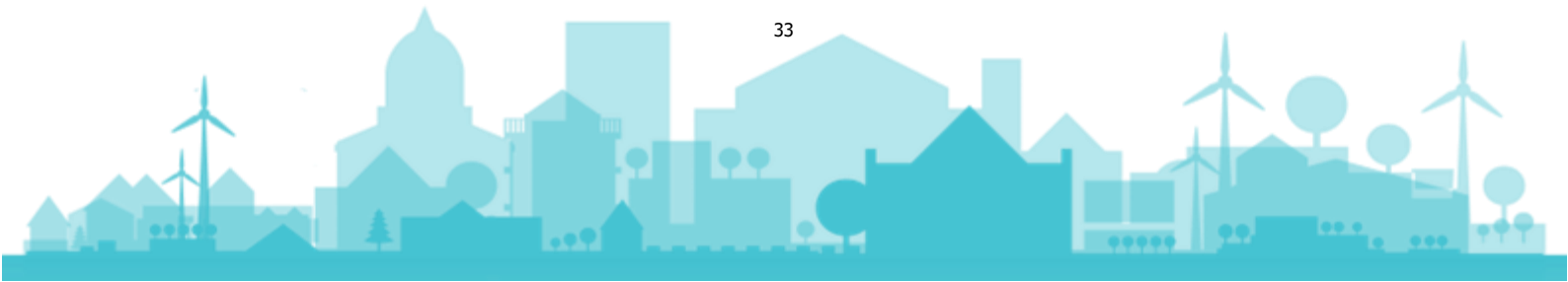
Finally, **institutional fragmentation among governance levels and different sectors as well as limited horizontal coordination** constitutes another major barrier to integrated water management.

### 3.4.3 Which existing EU policies, legislations or instruments are relevant for this Action?

Key EU frameworks shaping urban water management include the Water Framework Directive, Floods Directive, revised Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive, Nature Restoration Regulation, the Water Resilience Strategy and the European Green Deal.

Together they set obligations for water quality, risk management, ecosystem restoration, stormwater control and integrated planning. However, their effectiveness is reduced by fragmented implementation, uneven national transposition, inconsistent definitions, and limited guidance for cities on how to operationalise requirements at neighbourhood and district scale. Existing rules do not sufficiently connect urban planning with water





objectives, nor do they address cross-border coordination needs. Funding instruments, including Cohesion Policy, the Recovery and Resilience Facility, and emerging MFF arrangements are not yet aligned with regulatory priorities and rarely require or reward water-sensitive design. Clear links between regulation, indicators and funding criteria are missing.

This Action responds by mapping inconsistencies, identifying gaps that hinder municipal action, and proposing regulatory and funding adjustments that better reflect urban responsibilities, multi-level governance, and the need for integrated, place-based implementation.

### 3.4.4 Why is this Action needed?

Regulation remains fragmented and often inconsistent across water, planning, health, environment and funding frameworks, leaving cities without clear, actionable pathways for water-sensitive planning and investment.

This Action is needed to create coherence, legal certainty and aligned incentives so that municipalities can implement nature-based, circular and water-efficient solutions without administrative or financial barriers. It will provide cities with clearer obligations, integrated planning guidance, and better access to funding that reflects urban realities. By removing contradictions, synchronising key directives and embedding water as a core investment criterion, the Action supports more resilient neighbourhoods, reduced flood and drought risks, healthier public spaces and fairer governance.

Ultimately, it equips cities and citizens with the conditions to accelerate a water-sensitive transformation and ensures that regulation and funding match actual urban needs.

### 3.4.5 How will the Action be implemented?

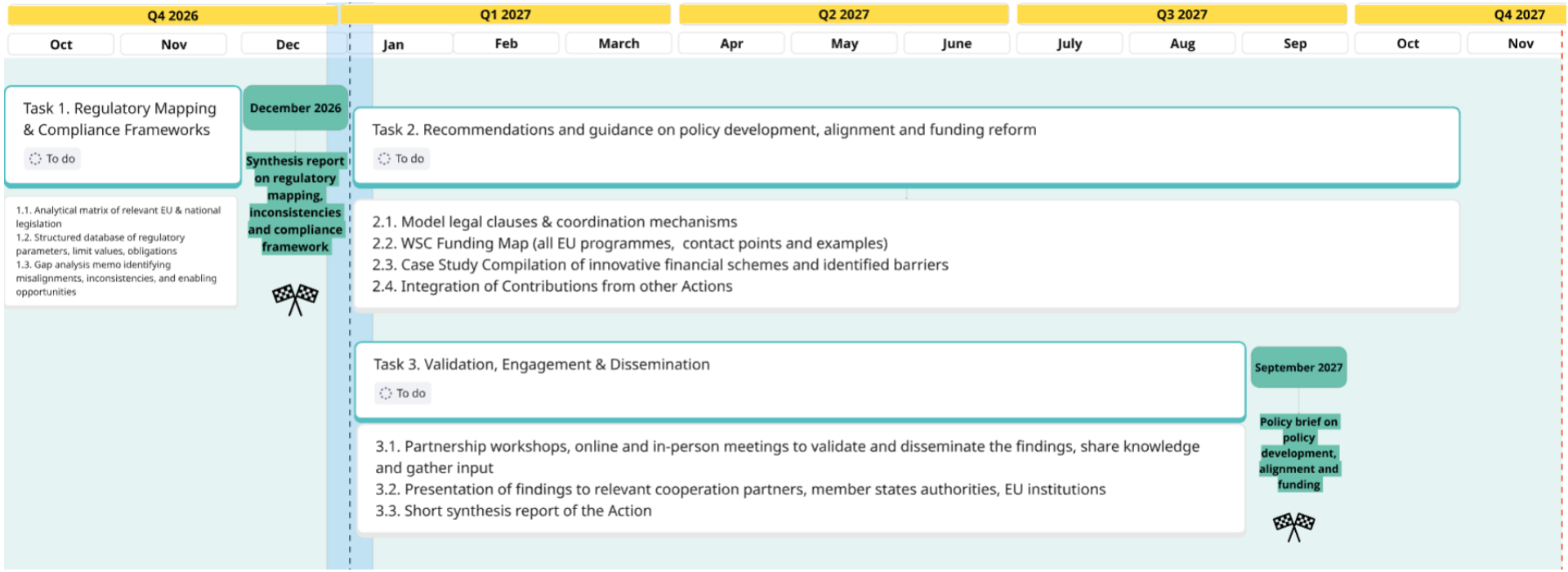
Action 2 operationalises the regulatory and policy foundations required to accelerate the uptake of Water Sensitive City approaches across governance levels. It combines systematic legal mapping, targeted policy guidance, and structured stakeholder validation to move from fragmented regulatory landscapes toward coherent, implementable frameworks.

The Action is designed to clarify compliance obligations, identify regulatory and funding bottlenecks, and translate EU and national legislation into actionable guidance for cities and regions. Through evidence-based analysis, concrete legal and financial tools, and structured engagement with partners and institutions, Action 2 directly supports better regulation, better funding, and better implementation capacity. The following tasks and outputs set out the concrete steps through which this enabling environment is developed and disseminated.

**Table of tasks, sub-tasks and outputs**

| Task | Description / Sub-tasks | Outputs |
|---|---|---|
| **TASK 1: Regulatory map and compliance framework** | 1.1. Analytical matrix of relevant EU & national legislation<br><br>1.2. Structured database of regulatory parameters, limit values, obligations<br><br>1.3. Gap analysis memo identifying misalignments, inconsistencies, and enabling opportunities | **Output 3: Synthesis report on regulatory mapping, inconsistencies and compliance framework**<br><br>Timeline: Dec. 2026 |
| **TASK 2: Recommendations and guidance on policy development, alignment and funding reform** | 2.1. Model legal clauses & coordination mechanisms<br><br>2.2. WSC Funding Map (all EU programmes, contact points and examples)<br><br>2.3. Case Study Compilation of innovative financial schemes and identified barriers<br><br>2.4. Integration of Contributions from other Actions | |
| **TASK 3: Validation, engagement and dissemination** | 3.1. Policy Brief (8–10 pages) with legislative and governance recommendations<br><br>3.2. Partnership workshops, online and in-person meetings to validate and disseminate the findings, share knowledge and gather input<br><br>3.3. Presentation of findings to relevant cooperation partners, member states authorities, EU institutions | **Output 4: Policy brief on policy development, alignment and funding**<br><br>Timeline: by October 2027 |

**Fig. 4 Implementation timeline for Action 2**



### 3.4.6 What resources are needed?

Implementation requires a combination of internal coordination capacity, specialised legal expertise and analytical support. Partners will need staff time from urban planners, legal advisers, water experts and funding specialists to review legislation, interpret obligations, and coordinate with other Action Groups.

Additional administrative support is required for organising workshops, consultations and peer reviews. External expertise is needed for the detailed EU regulatory scan, comparative analysis of national transpositions, and the preparation of model legal clauses and funding-alignment recommendations. Targeted legal–economic expertise may also be required for assessing funding regulations, including MFF and Cohesion Policy mechanisms.

Financial resources are needed for expert contracts, facilitation of workshops, preparation of publications, and translation where relevant. Basic IT infrastructure, shared digital workspaces, and common analytical tools are required for producing the compliance matrix. No specialised hardware is foreseen beyond standard office and data-handling software. Some costs may arise from licences for legal databases, travel for in-person validation sessions, and external communication outputs.

### 3.4.7 Are there any foreseen risks?

The Action may face delays due to:

- **The complexity of aligning multiple directives, national transpositions and funding regulations.**
- **Diverging political priorities across Member States** can slow consensus-building, while changes in the EU policy cycle or MFF negotiations may affect timing and relevance.
- **Institutional fragmentation and limited capacity in smaller municipalities** may reduce the uptake of recommendations.
- **Risks also stem from insufficient engagement of ministries or urban authorities during validatio**n, which could weaken the legitimacy of outputs.
- **Cross-partnership coordination** adds additional organisational challenges. Limited availability of high-quality legal and financial expertise may affect the depth of analysis.

**Mitigation measures:** Clear governance, early involvement of key actors and structured consultation processes are needed to mitigate these risks.

### 3.4.8 Which members of the UAEU Partnership are involved in implementation of the Action?

**Action Leader: Ministry of Climate (Estonia)**

**Partners:**

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

### 3.4.9 Territorial Impact Assessment

This Action has clear territorial relevance, as regulatory fragmentation and administrative complexity affect cities differently depending on their size, capacity, geographical context, and exposure to water-related risks. However, the Action does not propose new legislation, binding regulatory changes, or territorially differentiated legal obligations. It focuses on analytical mapping, clarification, and alignment of existing EU and national regulatory frameworks, as well as the provision of non-binding guidance and recommendations.

Given this scope, **a formal Territorial Impact Assessment is not required.** The Action does not introduce measures that would trigger differentiated territorial effects in legal, financial, or administrative terms, nor does it impose new compliance burdens on specific territories. Instead, it seeks to improve transparency, coherence, and usability of existing rules across all territorial contexts.

**Territorial considerations will be addressed in a proportionate and qualitative manner** through the regulatory mapping, gap analysis, case studies, and stakeholder engagement activities foreseen under the Action. These elements will explicitly consider differences between small, medium, and large municipalities, cross-border and river-basin contexts, and varying administrative capacities, without constituting a standalone impact assessment exercise.

This approach ensures that recommendations remain place-sensitive and supportive of multi-level governance, while avoiding unnecessary analytical duplication and administrative overhead that would not be justified given the non-legislative nature of the Action.

### 3.4.10 Are you aware of any existing Territorial Impact Assessment in relation to certain EU legislative initiatives, which may be relevant for this Action?

Territorial implications of EU water policy have recently been analysed in the context of the **Territorial Impact Assessment (TIA) of the European Water Resilience Strategy (WRS),** prepared by the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) with support from ESPON. The TIA provides a comprehensive overview of how water resilience objectives may generate substantial but uneven territorial effects across EU regions, depending on hydrological conditions, climate exposure, infrastructure maturity, economic structure, and governance capacity.

The TIA confirms that a uniform policy approach to water resilience risks producing asymmetric impacts, particularly for cities and regions with limited administrative capacity, high exposure to droughts or floods, or responsibilities for cross-boundary river basin management. It therefore calls for regionally adapted targets, differentiated implementation pathways, and stronger involvement of local and regional authorities in water-related decision-making. The CoR has further underlined **the need to integrate water considerations systematically across EU policies,** including through the application of a **horizontal "Water Test" to EU legislation**, as well as for long-term, place-based financing of water resilience measures under future EU budgets and cohesion policy instruments.

These findings are directly relevant to this Action. They reinforce the Action's underlying rationale that regulatory fragmentation, inconsistent transposition, and misaligned funding rules can amplify territorial inequalities, even in the absence of new legislation. Rather than duplicating existing territorial impact assessments, this Action builds on their conclusions by focusing on regulatory mapping, identification of compliance bottlenecks, and clarification of governance and funding interfaces that are particularly challenging for cities and municipalities.

In this way, the Action complements the WRS TIA by translating its high-level territorial insights into practical, non-binding recommendations aimed at improving coherence, proportionality, and usability of existing regulatory and funding frameworks, thereby supporting more balanced and effective implementation of EU water policy across diverse urban and regional contexts.

### 3.4.11 Are there any EU legislative initiatives or proposals that may result in considerable spatial imbalances, which are relevant for this Action?

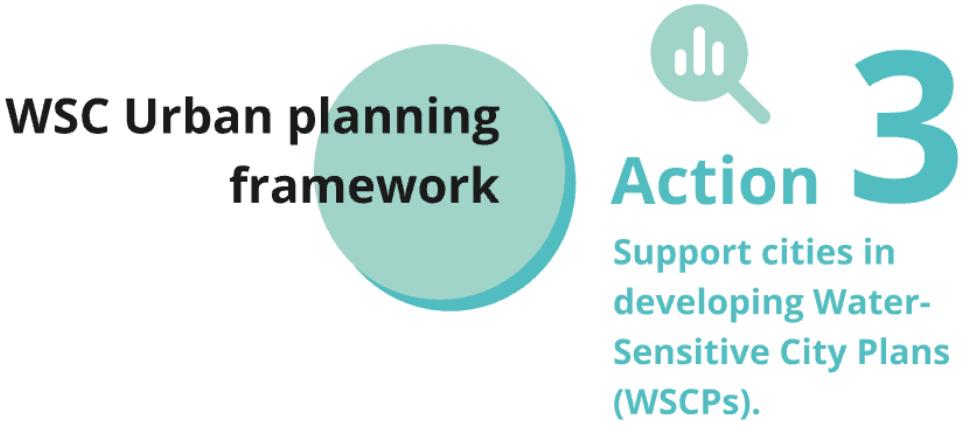
Several forthcoming or recently revised EU initiatives may generate uneven territorial impacts if not carefully aligned with urban needs and local implementation capacity. The revised Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive introduces new requirements for integrated urban wastewater management plans, which may place a heavier burden on smaller

municipalities with limited technical expertise. The Nature Restoration Regulation and the Water Resilience Strategy require significant investment in green–blue infrastructure and water retention, potentially widening gaps between well-resourced cities and those with constrained budgets.

Upcoming reforms under the next MFF and Cohesion Policy could also create imbalances if funding criteria do not explicitly **account for water sensitivity or differing administrative capacities**. In addition, inconsistencies in national transposition of the Water Framework Directive and Floods Directive can produce cross-border disparities, especially along shared river basins.

These developments underline the need for coherent, place-based regulatory and funding recommendations, which this Action aims to deliver.

## 3.5 Action N° 03 – Urban Planning Framework




This Action supports cities in developing ***Water-Sensitive City Plans (WSCPs)***, an integrated planning tool designed to mitigate water-related risks, enhance urban resilience, and generate socio-economic and environmental co-benefits through decentralised water management and nature-based solutions (NBS). The Action will develop a ***Roadmap*** for *WSCP* implementation and conduct ***Pilot Testing Action*** to identify barriers to implementation, including challenges related to water neutrality, water accounting, and policy integration.

**Targeted stakeholders/governance level:** Local level, intermunicipal level (urban water catchment)

**Deadline:** November 2027

### 3.5.1 Which of the three pillars is this Action contributing to?

This Action contributes to all three Urban Agenda for the EU pillars.

| Action 3: Relevance to the 3 Pillars of the UAEU | |
|---|---|
|  Better regulation | Relates to the primary task of the Action: supporting the development of an urban planning tool, named *Water Sensitive City Plans*, intended to function as a regulatory once formally adopted. **70%** |

| | |
|---|---|
|  Better funding | The Action addresses the financial aspects of becoming *water sensitive*, including the cost of introducing the plan, the economic assessment of the proposed interventions, and the maintenance of both existing and new water infrastructure. Together, these elements influence the overall management and logistics of water-related costs. **20%** |
|  Better knowledge | The *Water Sensitive Plans* serve as a comprehensive platform that consolidates existing knowledge (e.g., on water regulations and water-risk assessments) and propose practical applications of this knowledge, such as possible planning interventions. **10%** |

### 3.5.2 What is the specific problem this Action is aiming to address?

- **Essential lack of *Water Sensitive City Plans* across Europe and resulting lack of integration of Urban Water Management (UWM) and urban planning.** While the recast UWWTD requires in specific cases the adoption of an integrated urban wastewater management plan, most European Cities lack an integrated planning tool focused on the management of water in an integrative manner, rather than specifically (e.g. surface water streams flow or anti-flood protection). Urban water is frequently treated as a technical or infrastructure issue rather than a core component of spatial planning, urban design, and long-term resilience strategies. In times of increasing climate risks, especially in urban areas, to manage water sustainably, water-sensitive regulations must be integrated into urban planning.

- **Cities lack strategic, transformative planning frameworks in the field of water management with NbS tools embedded.** Despite increasing awareness of water-related challenges, especially in the contexts that experienced water disruptions, transforming existing water systems (including wastewater, stormwater, and surface water management) towards more resilient configurations requires a strategic approach and vision-oriented planning frameworks. Unlocking NbS benefits demands long-term commitment, and benefits are long-term themselves (i.e. increased biodiversity and improved water retention). However, short-term planning cycles and competing land-use priorities often fail to accommodate this need for long-term commitment.

- **Lack of planning regulations embedding water sensitivity.** Much of urban land is privately owned, complicating efforts to meet broader urban water management needs. The ***WSCPs*** provide an opportunity to address this gap by establishing normative guidance that can mobilize the private sector and integrate water-sensitive measures, such as water-saving design, retention,

storage, and reuse, into building-level and urban planning decisions, thereby enhancing resilience and sustainability in dense urban environments.

- **Lack of NbS implementation guidance**. The need for clear and actionable implementation guidelines for NbS. In dense urban environments, implementing NbS demands flexible and adaptable solutions capable of responding to an increasingly unpredictable climate. Challenges such as drought, intense rainfall, and water quality issues require integrated approaches that combine grey, green, and blue infrastructure. To guide the adoption of NbS, clear and actionable implementation guidelines are needed, grounded in a holistic understanding of urban systems and environmental interdependencies. The suggested guidelines should also cover available solutions in compact and already developed urban areas where public space is limited.

- **The problem of underrepresentation of quantified water related measures** (i.e. water indicators, cost and revenue of investments) in current planning.

- **Lack of robust indicators for water scarcity/excess hinders evidence-based, preventive urban planning.** Planners lack knowledge of NbS tools, impacts, costs, and prioritization. Missing correlation between context, interventions, costs, and outcomes.

- **The lack of coordination among institutions, fragmented governance and lack of water stakeholders and citizens participation in water decision making.** Implementing water-related NbS across regions faces challenges from fragmented governance, inconsistent regulations, and uneven institutional capacity. Coordination between upstream and downstream jurisdictions is often weak, creating inefficiencies, conflicting objectives, and missed opportunities for synergies. While harmonised policies and joint planning are needed, overly rigid regulations can hinder adoption and flexibility, limiting the long-term effectiveness of water-sensitive urban solutions.

- **Awareness to water risks and *water sensitive* planning benefits among decision-makers, stakeholders, and citizens remains insufficient.** Limited awareness of water-related risks and socio-economic impacts hinders interest in implementation of ***WSCPs***. Awareness of NbS is strong in academia but weak cross-sectorally. Municipal departments rely often on outdated practices, limiting engagement. Knowledge gaps on ecosystem services (i.e. carbon sequestration, water purification, flood mitigation, habitat creation) impede quantification, communication, and investment. *Water-sensitive* planning requires upfront costs, while long-term benefits are often overlooked by funding mechanisms.

### 3.5.3 Which existing EU policies, legislations or instruments are relevant for this Action?

This Action intersects multiple EU frameworks across different disciplines, to ensure the alignment of ***Water Sensitive City Plans*** with existing EU policies. In addition to core policies relevant to the WSC Partnership, including the EU Green Deal, Water Resilience and Biodiversity Strategies, New European Bauhaus, EU Missions, and Cohesion Policy objectives recent regulations relevant to Action 3 include:

- Biodiversity Strategy for 2030,
- Climate Adaptation Strategy,
- Drinking Water Directive,
- Floods Directive,
- Nature Restoration Regulation,
- Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive,
- Water Framework Directive,
- Water Reuse Regulation.

The approach of this Action is to focus on alignment with these policies in the outputs, particularly ***Roadmap to WSCP***, as it positions the *WSCP* as the operational implementation of these frameworks at the local or inter-municipal scale, addressing questions about the practical effectiveness of EU policies as experienced by citizens.

In cooperation with **Action 2 – Enabling Regulation**, this Action also aims to identify gaps and frictions with existing EU policies. It will highlight areas within current policies that require reinforcement or the introduction of additional tools to enable effective *water sensitive* planning and implementation, i.e. regarding the compliance of *water-sensitive solutions* with Water Reuse Regulation and Drinking Water Directive.

### 3.5.4 Why is this Action needed?

The concept of *water sensitive planning* is recognized as the key practice driving the transition of current modalities of Urban Water Management, towards resilient water systems. The role of planning is highlighted on multiple levels, as:

- A governance tool - perceived as the regulatory binder for the compartmentalized water management;

- A driver for the implementation of *water-sensitive solutions,* i.e. regarding the increase of surface permeability, decentralized water possession, Alternative Water Sources (AWS), Rainwater Harvesting (RWH), the "room for rivers" concept;

- A platform for participation and communication – enabling and formalizing the necessary involvement of water stakeholders and citizens.

Moreover, addressing the target of local and intermunicipal governments, urban planning is the most tangible tool that these authorities operate with and that are responsible for. At the same time, these authorities are the key target of the EUI Partnerships.

Despite the multiple critics of urban planning (that regards rather regulatory than development approach; its capacity to drive long-term development; slow implementation and political and bureaucratic hindering), it is still perceived by this Partnership as the promising practice for introducing *water sensitive* measures.

Recognizing the necessity and shortcomings of urban planning practice, this Action is needed then to support local governments in developing the most context-accurate, implementation-centred, long-term vision-oriented, stakeholders-inclusive, citizens-informed and participative implementation of ***Water Sensitive City Plans.***

### 3.5.5 How will the Action be implemented?

The Action defines two primary outputs, aiming to support the introduction of ***Water Sensitive City Plans*** in European cities.

The first output – ***Roadmap to Water Sensitive City Plan*** – outlines sequential steps, milestones and responsibilities for achieving this urban policy over time. It provides the clear implementation trajectory, helping local and intermunicipal governments to align actions, coordinate efforts, and track progress toward the goal of developing the ***WSCP***.

The second output – ***Pilot Testing Action for Water Sensitive City*** – is intended as a smaller scale, real-world implementation of a key part of this policy regarding *water-sensitive solutions*. Specifically, it may involve integration into newly developing urban area within one of member cities; a transformation of existing water infrastructure, etc. This ***Pilot Testing Action*** serves not only as a proof of WSC Plan credibility, but is also useful for providing additional knowledge, generate practical insights, identifying frictions, challenges and barriers to water neutrality, accounting and policy making and informing a scale-up strategy of the WSC Plan.

- *Task 1 - Plan's hardware – water sensitive solutions* - focuses on understanding how the concept of Water Sensitive City translates to concrete spatial action and what kind of vision of the coherent redefinition of the urban water system it entails. The task is meant to support the component(s) of the *Roadmap to a Water Sensitive City* output. From an operational point of view, the task is intended to be developed "from general to particular", which means starting from WSC concept understanding and finishing on the focus areas – based especially on the climatic context and the water risks. For this task, the external expertise – organized in two Work Packages: Risks Mapping and Solution Matrix, is especially valuable.

- *Task 2 - Plan's software – Water Sensitive City Plan components* is meant to assure the integrated approach of the future Water Sensitive City Plan, through correlation with the domains supporting the effective implementation; those include: regulatory frameworks, stakeholders and citizens engagement, financing schemes,

monitoring, evaluation and reporting. Since these domains lie already in the focus of other Actions of this Partnership (cited below), this task is meant to use their outcomes to prepare suggestions regarding these domains, useful for assuring coherence of the future WSC Plans. The added value of this task is however forming these insights as components of the coherent Plan, through ordering and prioritisation.

- Keeping in mind the limited timeframe of this Partnership, *Task 3 - Preparation of Pilot Testing Action* assures that Pilot Testing Action will be feasible in terms of time and budget, in a way the conclusions of the Testing Action can help to revise the draft version of the Roadmap already before the official end of the Partnership. The task focuses also on aligning the Testing Action with the insights of already developed at this stage draft Roadmap.

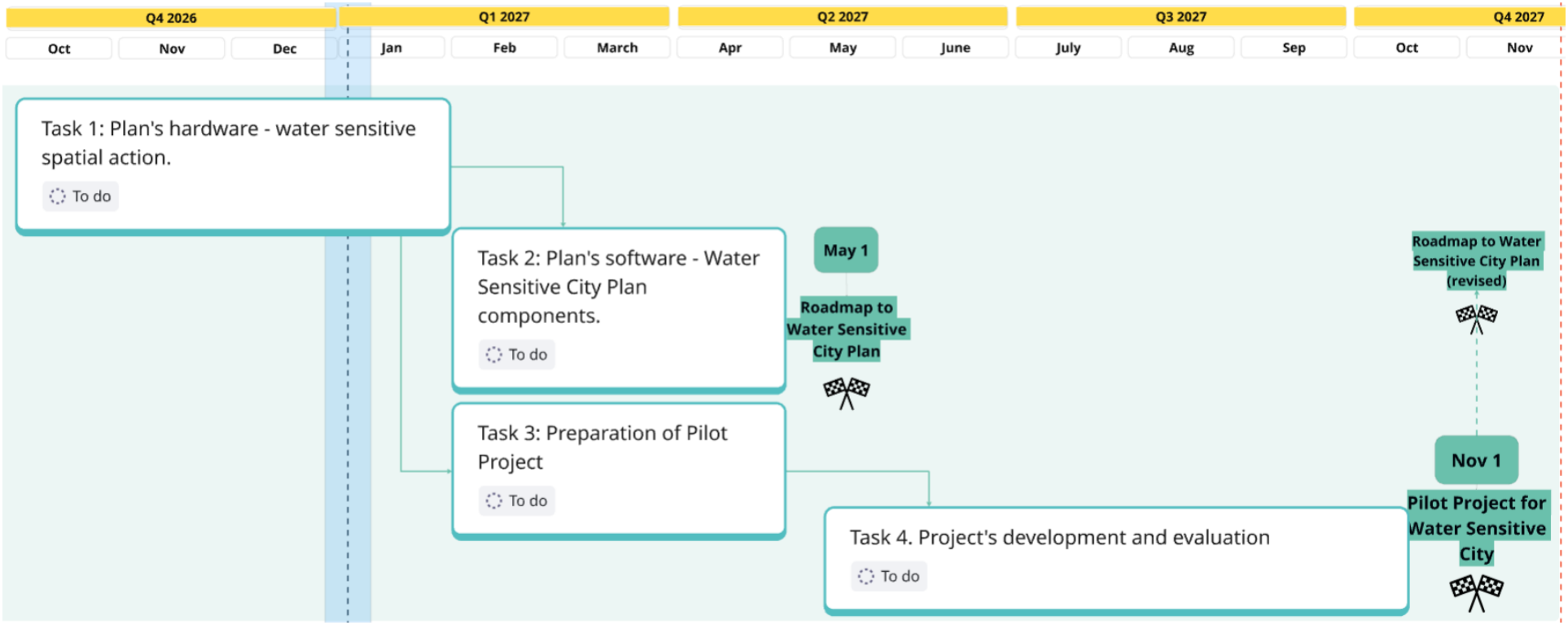
- While the specific development of the *Task 4 - Testing Action's development and evaluation* lies in the prerogative of the involved member, this task assures that *Testing Action* is monitored and evaluated according to the components of the *Roadmap*, while yielding conclusions to support its revision.

**Table of tasks, sub-tasks and outputs**

| Task | Description / Sub-tasks | Outputs |
|---|---|---|
| **TASK 1: Plan's hardware – water sensitive spatial action** | **1.1 Unrolling *Water Sensitive City* into strategic vision and spatial action** (with external expertise support from EUI)<br><br>**1.2 Evidencing the Water Sensitive City focus depending on the risk assessment - flowchart** (with external expertise support from EUI) | |
| **TASK 2: Plan's software – Water Sensitive City Plan components** | **2.1 Definition of Water Sensitive City Plan components**<br>• Support information for the components, with cooperation of other Actions, including:<br>a. navigating regulation panorama (Action 2)<br>b. stakeholders and citizens engagement assuring equity and inclusivity of plan (Action 7)<br>c. financing of the *water-sensitive* actions (Action 4) | **Output 5: Roadmap to Water Sensitive City Plan**<br><br>Deadlines: May 1 2027 (draft), Nov. 30 2027 (final revised version) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | d. monitoring, evaluation and reporting (Action 1 & 5)<br><br>**2.2 Ordering, prioritization of the suggestions, aligning *Plan's* hardware and software** | |
| **TASK 3: Preparation of Pilot Testing Action** | **3.1 Definition of the expected outcome** in relation to i.e. scale, governance level involvement, resources needed.<br><br>**3.2 Choice of Pilot Project across Partnership's members** (or – if possible - launch of the external call for application).<br><br>**3.3 Draft for development of the project timing, its monitoring and evaluation** in relation to *Roadmap to Water Sensitive City Plan*. | |
| **TASK 4: Testing Action's development and evaluation** | **4.1 Launch of the *Testing Action*.**<br><br>**4.2 Development, monitoring and evaluation of the *Testing Action*.**<br><br>**4.3 Revision of *Roadmap to Water Sensitive City Plan*** based on project's outcomes. | **Output 6: Pilot Testing Action for Water Sensitive City.**<br><br>Deadline for a launch of Pilot Testing Action: 1 May 2027<br><br>Deadline for gathering conclusions from Pilot Testing Action: 1 October 2027 |

**Fig. 5 Implementation timeline for Action 3**



### 3.5.6 What resources are needed?

Action 3 is an Action that will require coordination, intensive desk work and extensive coordination with Actions 1, 2, 4 and 5. The external expertise will be used to determine the roadmap to water sensitivity split into two Work Packages, Risk mapping and a solution matrix. The application of the external expertise into a roadmap will require a large time commitment from the members of the Action, weighted to the end of the Action Plan, for it is dependent on outputs of Actions 1,2,4 and 5.

The pilot of the Action will require extensive commitment from one of the partners within the WSC Partnership to pilot and review the roadmap. Coordination of this task will require internal capacity of the partners in meetings and administrative tasks related to the pilot and review process.

Financial resources are needed for the external expertise and the piloting of the plan. The success of the pilot is dependent on a structured and committed approach, the financial resources for the partner(s) which will pilot this *Roadmap to a water sensitive city* will make this integrated approach possible.

Note: *Especially regarding the Pilot Testing Action, a more specific definition is in progress. Commitment from one or more partners is required, along with a preliminary assessment of resources to support pilot development.*

### 3.5.7 Are there any foreseen risks?

- **Clarity in translating *Water Sensitive City* concept into tangible solutions. Mitigation measures:** relating the Water Sensitive City objectives to the risks recognized in the assessment and their match with possible mitigation measures.

- **Balance between general and context specific in the light of high context specificity** – reflecting existing local regulations, governance structures, and climatic conditions**. Mitigation measures:** mapping of risks in relation to type of territory and the cooperation between other Actions, i.e. regarding regulations.

- **Capacity to identify and address appropriate targets within local government contexts,** where responsibilities and bureaucratic fragmentation vary. **Mitigation measures:** Provide guidance structured around a flowchart logic, starting with general recommendations and progressively narrowing to context-specific actions, potentially aligned with recognized representative contexts.

- **Timeframe of the *Pilot Testing Action* may be delayed** due to unforeseen circumstances in the local contexts where the pilot is implemented. **Mitigation measures:** Rapidly finalize a concrete definition of the *Pilot Testing Action*,

supported by an efficient preliminary assessment and pre-management planning.

### 3.5.8 Which members of the UAEU Partnership are involved in implementation of the Action?

**Action Leader:**

- Municipality of Turin

**Partners:**

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

Note: *Specific tasks will be assigned to the partners. Moreover, regarding the Output 2: Pilot Testing Action for Water Sensitive City, the partner city willing to implement the Pilot will be identified.*

### 3.5.9 Territorial Impact Assessment

Territorial Impact Assessments (TIAs) aim to assess how EU legislation, policies and programmes might affect different places and types of territories differently, for example by creating urban-rural disparities, regional gaps in implementation capacity, or systemic advantages for better-resourced areas. These assessments can use both qualitative and quantitative methods to identify which territories are most exposed to positive or negative impacts, thereby supporting better-informed policy design and implementation.

Action 3 is strongly correlated with the issues analysed in Territorial Impact Assessments. First, it is particularly relevant (estimated at around 70%) to the "better regulation" pillar, as it aims to support local governments in developing urban planning tools intended to

function as normative instruments at the local government level. Second, the Action addresses key spatial issues, especially topics such as the implementation of Nature-based Solutions (NbS) and decentralised infrastructures. For these reasons, Action 3 is closely aligned with the objectives of TIAs and with already developed or ongoing assessments listed in Section 2.3.10.

At the same time, there are strong indications that TIAs are primarily tools designed to engage directly with policies and regulations of a different nature than the outputs of this Action. TIAs focus on territorial imbalances, recognising differences in regional or urban–rural capacities to implement EU-level legislation. In contrast, the outputs of Action 3 are intended **primarily to support local governments**. The *Roadmap to the Water Sensitive City Plan* is conceived as a guiding document that helps local governments understand motivations, content, implementation mechanisms, prioritisation, and navigation within existing regulatory frameworks, financing options, and monitoring systems.

While the *Roadmap* aims to provide as concrete guidance as possible, it also acknowledges fundamental differences in territorial contexts across the EU, including variations in local regulatory frameworks and available resources. The challenge of balancing inclusiveness with practical specificity has been central to discussions on the implementation of this Action (see Section 2.3.6). In this respect, the approach of "narrowing the focus" has been useful in defining how to guide readers of the *Roadmap*. This approach moves from general principles to more specific guidance, allowing local governments, the intended target audience, to follow pathways aligned with their capacities, needs, motivations, and available resources.

Moreover, **the *Roadmap to the Water Sensitive City Plan* is not intended to function as a direct regulatory tool**. It may only assume such a role once it is adapted and filtered through conditions identified at the local government level, which represents the primary scale of implementation. Additionally, it may have an indirect impact on EU-level regulation once it is taken up to inform the ongoing work of the European Commission's Directorates-General, such as the updating of policies listed in Section 2.3.3. This is strongly recommended to increase the overall impact of the EUI Partnerships.

For these reasons, **Action 3 is not considered to pose a risk of creating direct territorial imbalances**. Nevertheless, given its thematic links to issues addressed by Territorial Impact Assessments and the potential effects on EU-level regulatory frameworks following the dissemination of the Action's outputs, it is recommended to acknowledge already recognised territorial imbalances related to EU policies in the areas covered by this Action, as listed in Section 2.3.10.

### 3.5.10 Are you aware of any existing Territorial Impact Assessment in relation to certain EU legislative initiatives, which may be relevant for this Action?

Territorial implications of EU water policy have been analysed in the context of the Territorial Impact Assessment (TIA) on the European Water Resilience Strategy (WRS), prepared by the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) with support from ESPON. Based on the draft report, some areas of correlation could be identified:

- In the case of nature-based solutions (NbS) and decentralised water infrastructure, investment and maintenance costs are often high, posing a significant risk of territorial imbalances. The TIA stresses that local and regional authorities (LRAs) are the level at which water-related impacts are experienced, trade-offs are managed, and EU strategies become tangible for citizens, while local government capacities vary considerably across territories.

- The TIA identifies fragmented governance and insufficient cross-sector coordination as key factors weakening water resilience at territorial level, especially where responsibilities are dispersed across administrative boundaries and policy domains; which is particularly hindering the "watershed" or "urban watershed" based approaches.

- The TIA notes that territorial impacts often arise because long-term benefits; such as risk reduction, avoided costs, and ecosystem services; are undervalued compared to short-term costs, particularly at local level. This is especially relevant for NbS and decentralised water infrastructure, where implementation costs are immediate, while benefits are more difficult to quantify and are distributed over longer time horizons.

- The Water Resilience Strategy must remain adaptive to climate uncertainty, evolving water risks, and changing territorial conditions. At local level, this requires adequate capacities and resources to be maintained on a continuous basis.

### 3.5.11 Are there any EU legislative initiatives or proposals that may result in considerable spatial imbalances, which are relevant for this Action?

Several recent and upcoming EU initiatives risk creating uneven territorial impacts if urban realities and local implementation capacity are not adequately considered. New obligations under the revised **Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive** may disproportionately affect smaller municipalities with limited technical resources. Moreover, the **Nature Restoration** Regulation and the **Water Resilience Strategy** require substantial investment in green–blue infrastructure and water retention, which could widen disparities

between well-resourced cities and those with more constrained capacities. Differences in national implementation of the **Water Framework and Floods Directives** also risk generating cross-border inconsistencies, particularly in shared river basins. These challenges highlight the need for coherent, place-based regulatory and funding approaches, which this Action seeks to support.

## 3.6 Action N° 04 – Innovative Financing and Investment for Water-Sensitive Cities


**Cities face increasing difficulties in financing water-sensitive investments, as traditional public funding alone is often insufficient to address growing climate and water challenges.**

**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.**

**Building on a compilation of European good practices, the Action will develop recommendations to help local and regional authorities structure projects and combine EU, national and private funding more effectively. It will also explore synergies with EU initiatives (including the Sponge Facility under the Water Resilience Strategy), and partnerships with financial actors, including potential cooperation with the EIB, to support the scaling up of innovative solutions.**

**Targeted stakeholders/governance level:** local and regional governments, public water utilities and service providers, national ministries and agencies, financial and private sector actors

**Deadline:** October 2027

### 3.6.1 Which of the three pillars is this Action contributing to?

| Action 4: Relevance to the 3 Pillars of the UAEU | |
|---|---|
|  Better funding | • Identifies innovative financing models (PES, blended finance, PPP/PPCP, credits, etc.)<br>• Helps cities combine EU, national and private funding<br>• Links cities to EU instruments (EIB, Sponge Facility)<br>• Improves access to finance and investment capacity |
|  Better knowledge | • Compilation of good practices<br>• Guidance and recommendations for cities<br>• Understanding of financial mechanisms<br>• Capacity-building for local authorities to structure bankable projects |

### 3.6.2 What is the specific problem this Action is aiming to address?

At EU level, the Water Sensitive City concept has been formalised through the launch of the WSC Partnership under the Urban Agenda in 2024, but no dedicated WSC regulation or funding programmes exist so far. The Ex-ante Assessment report[5] highlighted that the current EU framework does not systematically ensure the integration of WSC principles into municipal planning and investment decisions.

On the funding side, support for WSC-related measures is available through several EU instruments, including Cohesion Policy funds, Horizon Europe, LIFE, Interreg, as well as national schemes. However, these resources are fragmented across different programmes, rules and governance levels, making them difficult for cities to access and combine. Moreover, EU funding instruments are currently under revision, creating uncertainties regarding the future availability and prioritisation of funding under the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). This situation is compounded by structural barriers such as high investment needs in urban water infrastructure, insufficient and unstable funding streams, and limited alignment of public and private investment frameworks with WSC objectives.

Innovative financial mechanisms, such as **Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES) and nature-positive financing tools,** are emerging but remain marginal and rarely accessible to municipalities. In addition, cities often lack the technical capacity and practical frameworks to identify, combine and operationalise innovative financial instruments, which further limits their ability to translate EU policy objectives into concrete investments. Strengthening cooperation between local authorities, EU institutions and financial actors is therefore essential.

[5] Water Sensitive City Ex-Ante Assessment report (2024). Link

In this context, financial institutions such as the EIB could play a catalytic role. This Action will address these challenges by developing practical pathways to mobilise innovative financing and scale up investment in WSC solutions across the EU.

### 3.6.3 Which existing EU policies, legislations or instruments are relevant for this Action?

Several EU policies and instruments are relevant for Action 4. At strategic level, the European Green Deal, the Water Resilience Strategy, EU climate adaptation and biodiversity policies, and the sustainable finance agenda provide an overarching framework for water-sensitive urban investments. Key legislative drivers include the Water Framework Directive, the revised Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive, the Floods Directive and the Nature Restoration Regulation, which generate increasing investment needs for cities.

In terms of funding, Cohesion Policy funds, LIFE, Horizon Europe, Interreg already support WSC-related measures, complemented by EIB lending and advisory services. These instruments are highly relevant but remain fragmented across programmes, rules and governance levels, making them difficult for cities to access and combine. Their effectiveness is further constrained by administrative complexity, limited local capacity to structure bankable projects, and the absence of dedicated pathways for innovative financing models. Moreover, several instruments are under revision and uncertainties linked to the next MFF reduce predictability for long-term urban investment planning.

### 3.6.4 Why is this Action needed?

**Current funding frameworks for urban water projects remain fragmented, short-term and uncertain**, limiting cities' ability to scale up water-sensitive investments. Although innovative financial instruments exist, they are rarely operationalised at local level and insufficiently integrated into EU and national investment frameworks.

This Action will address these gaps by identifying and **promoting innovative and replicable financing models and translating them into practical guidance for municipalities**. It will showcase good practices and make instruments such as Payments for Ecosystem Services, water or nature credits, blended finance and PPP/PPCP models more operational for cities and investors.

In parallel, the Action will explore two complementary strands: contributing to the development of the **Sponge Facility** under the European Water Resilience Strategy (outcomes and experiences of this Action will contribute to and support the development of the Sponge Facility), and strengthening cooperation with the **European Investment Bank** (to better align existing financial tools with municipal WSC projects). Overall, it will clarify investment pathways and equip municipalities with concrete tools to plan and finance water-sensitive projects at scale.

### 3.6.5 How will the Action be implemented?

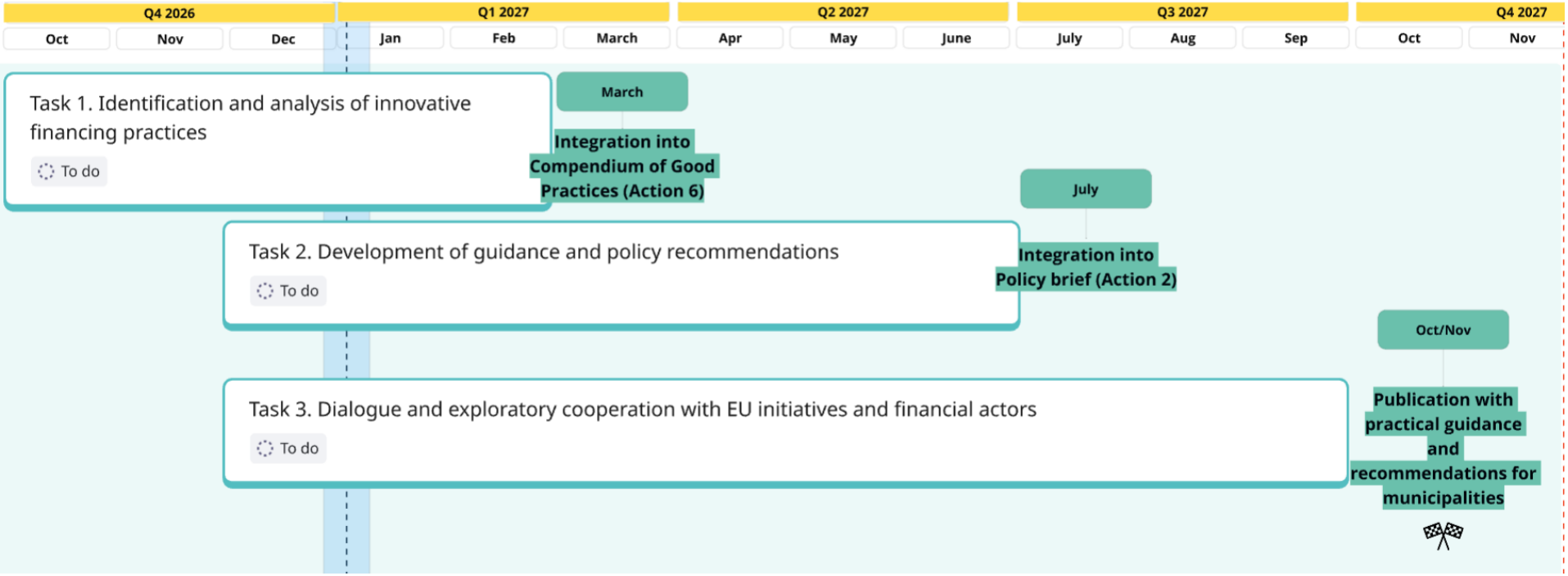
Action 4 will be implemented through analytical work, knowledge exchange and policy dialogue, complemented by exploratory cooperation with key EU actors. The Action combines concrete deliverables with flexible engagement formats to support cities in accessing innovative financing and to strengthen alignment with evolving EU initiatives.

**Table of tasks, sub-tasks and outputs**

| Task | Description / Sub-tasks | Outputs |
|---|---|---|
| **TASK 1: Identification and analysis of innovative financing practices** | • Identify and analyse good practices of innovative financing applied to Water-Sensitive Urban Design (WSUD) and related fields (e.g. nature-based solutions, climate adaptation, ecosystem restoration).<br><br>• Assess enabling conditions, governance models, risk-sharing mechanisms and replicability potential for EU municipalities.<br><br>• Collect case studies across different territorial contexts and governance levels. | Compilation of European good practices on innovative financing for WSUD with analytical overview of financing models and enabling factors, to **be integrated in Output 10 from Action 6**<br><br>Deadline: Q1 2027 |
| **TASK 2: Development of guidance and policy recommendations** | • Develop practical guidance for cities on how to integrate innovative financing into WSC planning and investment processes.<br><br>• Map relevant EU policies, legislation and funding frameworks related to innovative financing (including PES, credits, blended finance, PPP/PPCP models).<br><br>• Identify policy gaps, alignment needs and opportunities to better recognise innovative financing mechanisms in EU frameworks.<br><br>• Formulate targeted recommendations for local, national and EU levels. | Policy brief on innovative financing in EU frameworks, contribution to **be integrated in Output 4 from Action 2**<br><br>Deadline: Q3 2027 |
| **TASK 3: Dialogue and exploratory cooperation with EU initiatives and financial actors** | • Organise informal exchanges with the European Investment Bank (EIB) to discuss existing financial tools and their relevance for municipal WSC projects. | **Output 7: Publication with practical guidance and recommendations for municipalities** |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | • Engage in dialogue with EU services and stakeholders on the development of the Sponge City Initiative under the Water Resilience Strategy.<br><br>• Identify potential areas for future cooperation | Deadline: Q4 2027 |

**Fig. 6 Implementation timeline for Action 4**



### 3.6.6 What resources are needed?

Action 4 will be implemented by the Action Leaders, with contributions from Partnership members and support from the Thematic Partnership Officer. Internal expertise will focus on urban water policy, innovative financing and municipal investment challenges. Activities will include the identification of good practices, validation of guidance and recommendations, participation in exchanges and dissemination activities. Action 4 will also work in synergy with Action 6 on the compilation of good practices and communication activities.

External expertise will be required mainly for Task 2, notably the mapping and analysis of EU policy and financing frameworks and the preparation of the policy brief. Targeted support from financial or legal experts may be mobilised where necessary.

Financial resources will be needed primarily for external expertise. The Action is designed to remain proportionate and to build on existing Partnership resources.

### 3.6.7 Are there any foreseen risks?

Several risks may affect the implementation of Action 4 – these include:

- **Limited availability of Partnership members or external experts** as well as weak engagement with target group could slow down analytical work and delivery of outputs.
- **Organisationally, coordination across multiple actors and governance levels** may require additional time and alignment efforts.
- **Politically, evolving EU priorities, ongoing revisions of funding instruments and uncertainties** linked to the next MFF may affect the relevance, timing or uptake of the Action's outputs.

**Mitigation measures:** To mitigate these risks, the Action will adopt a flexible and phased approach and rely on continuous dialogue with key stakeholders and EU institutions.

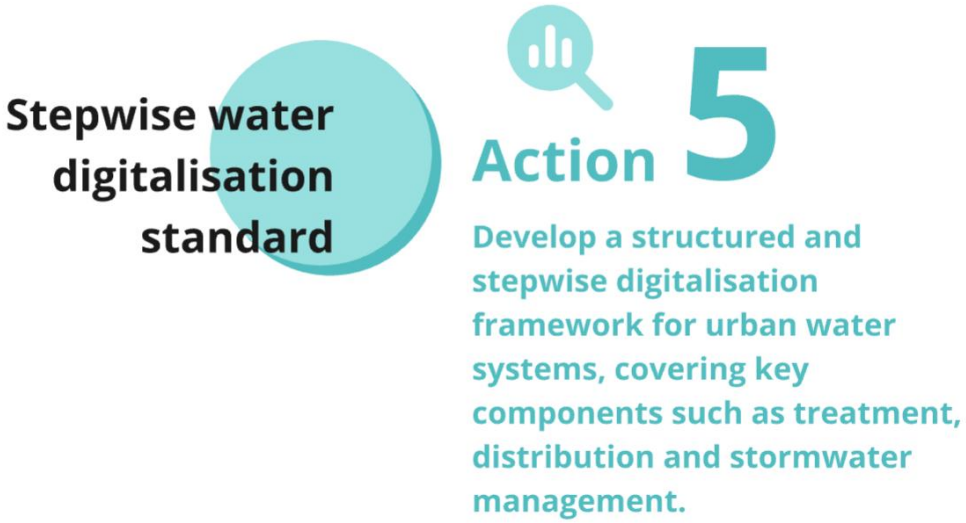
### 3.6.8 Which members of the UAEU Partnership are involved in implementation of the Action?

**Action Leader: CEMR**

**Partners:**

- CETAQUA
- DG ENV and DG REGIO.

## 3.7 Action N° 05 – Stepwise water digitalisation standard




**This Action aims to develop a segmented digitalisation standard for water systems according to their different components (treatment, distribution, stormwater, etc.). The main objectives are to support municipalities understand the requirements of EU water regulation; their compliance status and access digital technology solutions linked to key indicators and inform a simplified funding strategy at EU level.**

**Targeted stakeholders/governance level:** Municipalities, higher administrative levels at basin, national and European levels and European Commission, where regulatory compliance and requirements are generated and monitored.

**Deadline:** November 2027

### 3.7.1 Which of the three pillars is this Action contributing to?

| Action 5: Relevance to the 3 Pillars of the UAEU | |
|---|---|
|  Better regulation | As the Action attaches indicators related to EU water regulation, the European Commission will have three main benefits: firstly, to have a clear picture of the real level of compliance for its regulation, secondly, to assess the more pressuring risks the EU member states face in their municipalities and lastly to ease the |

| | |
|---|---|
| | development of new regulation considering the challenges presented by real-time data. **15%** |
|  <br>Better funding | The second major contribution of the Action is to funding: as digitalisation levels will have indicators attached, and each indicator will have clear technological solutions attached, the funding needs are well understood by both the EU and municipalities, lowering the access barriers to digitalisation for the latter. In this manner, the EU can build a funding strategy based on indicator measurement and related EU regulation compliance. As each indicator is linked to a digitalisation level, funding packages for each level can be developed, helping EU municipalities to achieve a similar level of digitalisation by prioritizing investment, while allowing for research by building packages to higher (C1-C2) digitalisation levels. **35%** |
|  <br>Better knowledge | The major contribution of this Action is to knowledge, both for municipalities as for the European Comision, as a set of indicators, attached to each A1 to C2 levels, help municipalities better understand the EU directives' requirements on water and their current compliance status, attach digital sensors to each indicator and better understand water management digitalisation on itself, the technological, economic and financial needs to move to an upper digitalisation level and improve the data quality; while at the same time, the European Commission has access to an almost real time data set on regulation compliance and can develop an easy-to-access funding strategy based on each digitalisation level, as financial requirements are better understood. **50%** |

### 3.7.2 What is the specific problem this Action is aiming to address?

There are several gaps on water digitalisation at the municipal level, derived from:

**Data quality:** fragmented data, lack of insight into data, etc., as implementation of digitalisation has no guidance for municipalities, tending to implement isolated, as opposed to integral, solutions on specific problems or regulation requirements. These solutions generally become discontinued over time given that the initial momentum dilutes and they fail to develop in an integrated manner or considering maintenance or possible extensions that could provide added value.

**Capacity for implementation:** a lack of understanding of digitalisation and limited resources, both human and financial, as small and medium size municipalities have little staff with limited knowledge or must prioritize these resources to other urgent tasks. The lack of guidance, expert profiles among employees, specific dedicated resources, financing and standardisation decreases the capacity of municipalities to implement digital solutions.

**Funding**: there is a lack of dedicated funding and complex funding mechanisms focused on specific cases (e.g. Horizon Europe). Small and medium size municipalities often lack the resources and "know-how" to apply for said funding as effort and ideation is placed into the applicant.

**Risk assessment and efficiency:** the absence of standardized indicators and digital integration slows risk assessment for floods, droughts, and water quality issues, while also reducing operational efficiency. Implementing robust indicators based on sensors and digital technologies and leveraging their produced data can streamline risk evaluation and optimize resource management by identifying areas of water loss, energy overuse, and quality degradation, and guiding municipalities toward targeted interventions, rationalizing their resources.

**Transparency, data accessibility and engagement:** there is a disconnect between water management utilities and civil society. Without accessible data and clear indicators, NGOs, private and public stakeholders and citizens cannot effectively participate in water preservation efforts, leading to a lack of trust and missed opportunities for community-driven water resilience.

As a result, municipalities struggle to prioritise investments, comply with EU regulation, and demonstrate impact.

### 3.7.3 Which existing EU policies, legislations or instruments are relevant for this Action?

One of the main goals of the Action's implementation efforts is the compliance with the EU's regulatory framework for water and environment thought the measurement of indicators. There are three main EU policies that might lever and might be reinforced by the Action:

The **EU Cohesion Policy**, through the Cohesion Fund and the European Regional Development Fund are important financing tools to achieve water management digitalisation throughout Europe. By building financing packages focused on each digitalisation level and monitored by indicators and compliance, these constitute the most relevant funding programmes for this Action. It is also worth noting that following the mid-term review of Cohesion Policy, digitalisation of the water sector is supported under the priority specific objective SO2.5, offering tools to achieve water efficiency and increase resilience.

- That compliance refers to the **EU's Water Framework Directive,** as it encompasses the regulatory compliance mandatory for municipalities. It both establishes the requirements to be measured (indicators) and can be improved by gathered digital data, being the guiding regulation for the Action.

- The **Water Resilience Strategy** establishes digitalisation as one of its main areas of action. The implementation of digital solutions can help achieve the WRS goals by measuring changes in water bodies, simulate scenarios and assess

the state of water systems to focus efforts where most needed. As such, the Water Resilience Strategy represents the main strategic framework for this Action.

Digitalisation of the water sector is a high policy priority at EU level. Within the framework of the Water Resilience Strategy, an **EU-wide Action Plan on digitalisation in the water sector including an EU-wide initiative on Smart metering for all** is planned to be launched in 2026. It will include two main pillars: "i) deployment of digital solutions through funding and knowledge-sharing to build up digital skills and encourage technology transfer in the water sector; and ii) support to water data sharing by fostering the development of national data portals to overcome fragmentation and make data easily findable, accessible free of charge, interoperable, and reusable, in line with the requirements of the Open Data Directive." [6] The Action will have the purpose, during implementation, to align with the goals of the Digitalisation Action Plan to be developed by DG ENV, especially on data management and indicator development.

### 3.7.4 Why is this Action needed?

**The main issues the Action aims to solve are the lack of knowledge on what water digitalisation is and the lack of easy to access funding.**

Establishing standardised digitalisation levels acts as a guide for municipalities on what are their real digitalisation needs and what EU regulation must be complied with, making use of it as an assessment tool. Attaching an array of technological solutions gives municipalities alternatives and options to pursue to increase their digitalisation level.

Once needs and technological tools are clearly exposed, funding is added with ease to already existing solutions for lower digitalisation levels (A1 to B2), but it does not hinder research and development, as higher levels (C1, C2) should be shown as new developments and have dedicated funding.

The Action might help cities achieve a greater digitalisation status, with all related benefits: water and energy savings, improved and faster responses to emergencies, improved assets management and network control (i.e., greater water management efficiency), improved water quality, improved risk assessment, scenario simulation for urban planning and extreme scenario simulation, all while ensuring water regulation compliance.

**The primary beneficiaries of this Action are small and medium-sized municipalities**, which gain a clear, stepwise pathway to water digitalisation aligned with EU regulatory requirements and realistic funding options. Managing Authorities and funding bodies benefit from improved transparency, comparability and prioritisation of investments, while the European Commission gains timely, standardised insights into regulatory compliance, risk patterns and digital readiness across EU cities, supporting more targeted policy design and funding allocation.

[6] Water Resilience Strategy Action Tracker: https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/water/water-resilience-strategy-actions-tracker_en

### 3.7.5 How will the Action be implemented?

**The Action will produce one main Output: the assessment of municipalities under the developed standard.** This goal is achieved by carrying out two main tasks. Task 1 focuses on producing a ready-to-use document for municipalities to assess their digital maturity on water management. Task 2 focuses on implementing said assessment and enriching the document with conclusions. This assessment acts as a proof of concept and allows for the extraction of conclusions and recommendations to adopt a similar standardized solution throughout the European Union.

**Table of tasks, sub-tasks and outputs**

| Task | Description / Sub-tasks | Outputs |
|---|---|---|
| **TASK 1: Intent of the action and standardisation of digital water management** | Task 1.1 Establishment of intent and context. Development of content of the standard.<br><br>Task 1.2 Segmentation of the standard and guidelines and technological solutions<br><br>Task 1.3 Development of financing scheme. External expertise required for the development of financing scheme. To be included in partnership's Policy Brief. | **Output 8: Implementation guidelines with related technological solutions.**<br><br>Deadline: By Q2 2027. |
| **TASK 2: Assessment of water companies based on standard.** | Task 2.1 Taking the developed guidelines and indicators, ask water companies or municipalities to assess themselves on the compliance to said indicators and propose possible improvements to reach a higher digitalisation level, directly related to indicators and technologies.<br><br>Task 2.2.. Adjustments to the standard after assessment is carried out. Annex with assessment as proof of concept. Compilation of recommendations to be incorporated into the WSC Partnership's Policy Brief. | **Output 9: Assessment of municipalities under the standard and recommendations (to be included in WSC Policy Brief).**<br><br>Deadline: By Q4 2027. |

As Task 1.2 will be the most resource demanding, during its development and implementation an internal exercise to measure and adjust the ambition of the Action is to be carried out, either maintaining the optimal scenario or limiting the reach to some core indicators and technologies as an example for further developments.

**Box. 1. Structure of the Final Output for Action 5 (Digital Water Management Implementation Guidelines)**

Chapter 1: Assessment of current situation, current problems; building the context for the development of the Action.

Chapter 2: Need and intent of the Action; a clear explanation of the aim of the Action and the problems it aims to solve.

Chapter 3: Content of the standard; based on the standard developed by the expert group on Water & Digital Systems from Water Europe, fragment it on different elements of water systems (treatment, distributions, clients, wastewater, stormwater, NBSs, etc.) and explain its content and standardisation needs.

Chapter 4: Segmentation of the standard; for each element of a water system, attaching indicators related to EU regulation for each level of the segmentation, from lower digitalisation levels (A1) to higher (C2).

Chapter 5: Guidelines for the implementation of the standard, digital solutions attached to each indicator, needed to reach a higher digitalisation level. According to resources availability and extension of the paper, a collection of good practices could be included in the chapter.

Chapter 6: Proof of concept; by assessing water companies and municipalities in the partnership on the developed standard. Said institutions must share the indicators that they are currently measuring, the technologies being used, the possibility to measure other indicators with no investment and propose technical improvements to achieve a higher digitalisation level, for each element of the managed water system. The chapter includes the conclusions drawn from the assessment and an evaluation of the assessment process, to improve the standard.

Annex: Assessment sheet of participating municipalities: a compilation of the result of the pilot testing to be carried out.

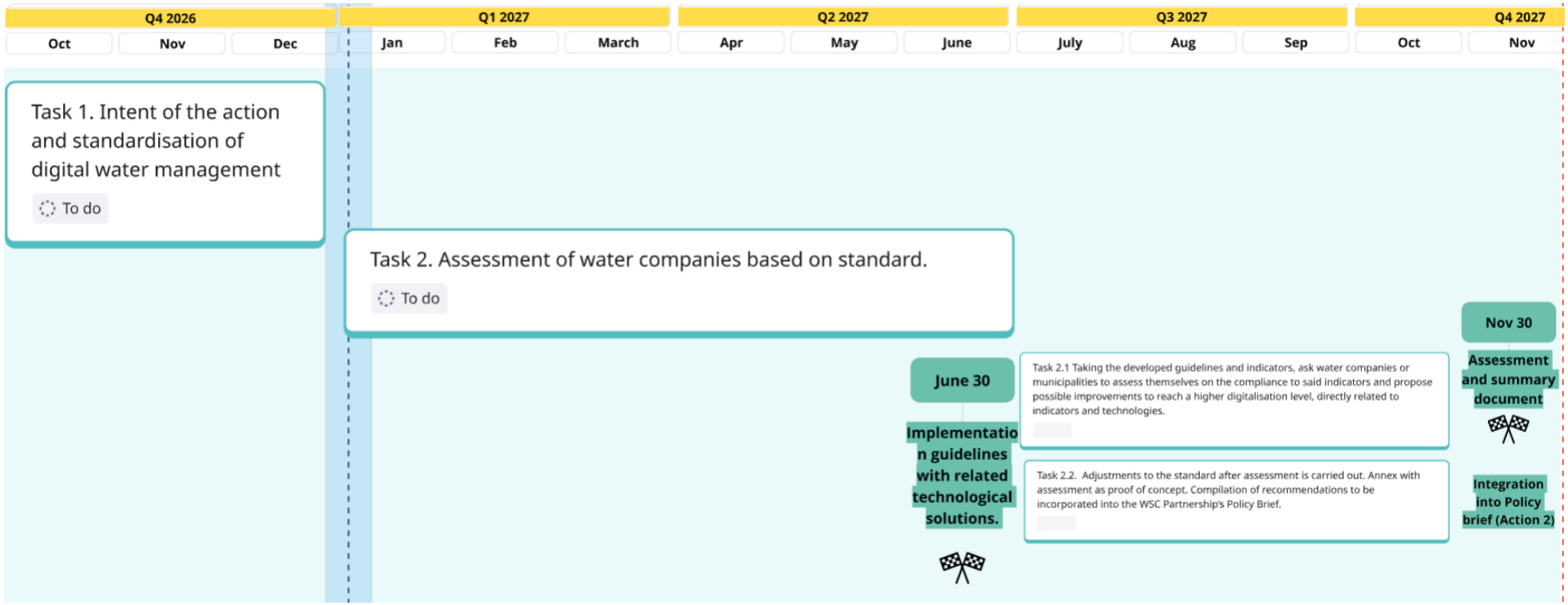
**Contributions to the Partnership's Policy Brief to the European Commission (Output 4, Action 2)**

- **Financing scheme proposal:** digital solutions to measure indicators have an implementation cost. Based on the assessment of municipalities on the standard, a financing scheme to jump from one level to the next should be developed, giving municipalities the economic resources to undertake the improvement of

their water systems through digitalisation. Higher levels (C1, C2) must be achievable and have the scheme of grants for research and innovation projects. This could also be expanded to water-demanding industries, as primary consumers and polluters of water.

- **Recommendations for the Commission on the adoption or further development of the standard** and the financing scheme to achieve better knowledge on the EU's water systems, better regulation through the assessment of compliance and the development of new regulation based on said assessment and better funding via financing schemes to allow small and medium size municipalities to digitalize their water systems.

**Fig. 7 Implementation timeline for Action 5**



### 3.7.6 What resources are needed?

Although desk work is to be carried out by the members of the Action Group, there is the need of collaboration from external partners and external expertise. The Action requires a moderate but sustained time commitment from partners over its duration, combining periodic coordination meetings with concentrated inputs during the development of the standard segmentation, indicator allocation and financing scheme.

The work to be carried out on task 1.1 is to be developed under the standard being developed by Water Europe. Therefore, collaboration from said institution is essential for the correct development of the segmented standard.

Task 1.2 is the most resource demanding and the core part, together with task 1.3 of the proposal. Although in the working group there is a variety of expertise (scientific, regional development and local level implementation), it is expected to ask for expertise for the better development and refinement of the segmentation of the standard, particularly to refine which indicators should be placed on which levels by criticality.

Task 1.3 is also suitable for expertise support for the better understanding of EU financing policies; as a financing scheme is to be proposed, it should be aligned with the EU's structure.

Task 2 requires water companies and municipalities to assess themselves. It is expected that there will not be a high friction, as there is a trade-off between knowledge for the companies and municipalities and testing the concept for the WSC partnership. It may also need some expertise to refine writing, do develop a well-rounded proposal for the Commission, aligned with its main strategies and language.

As indicators, measurements and sensors are being stored and used by water companies and municipalities, no additional resources are needed, and no additional costs are to be expected.

### 3.7.7 Are there any foreseen risks?

During the development of the Action, seven different risks have been identified:

- **Excess of ambition and capacity for implementation:** as development of the Action is reliant on resources placed by partners, there is a risk of excess of ambition or future lack of resources**. Mitigation measures**: an agreement has been reached to adjust the ambition of the segmented standard accordingly during the development of task 1.2, either by remaining on the optimal path with a full segmented standard or by downgrading ambition to the proposal of a segmented standard with a basic segmentation and set of indicators as proof of concept. The goal of the mitigation is to guarantee the quality of the final delivery while maintaining the most relevant contents of the Action that can be followed by municipalities

- **Dependence on Water Europe in the development of their standard.** As part of the work to be developed is based in a standard being developed by Water Europe, it exists a dependence on a third party. **Mitigation measures:** it has been proposed to work together with Water Europe to include the developments carried out during the Action's implementation (yet to be agreed by Water Europe). In case said collaboration is not feasible, the Action would propose the creation of said standard based on the findings from the Water Sensitive Partnership.

- **Overregulation and lack of data standardisation**: as issues of data security and GDPR compliance hinder ease of implementation. No mitigation measures have been established for the present risk, as it is a complex matter that already affects stakeholders in the water sector (i.e., water companies, municipalities, etc).

- **Digitalization as a tool and not as a goal**: there is a risk that implementing isolated solutions have great selling points but do not relate to the "efficiency first" principle. **Mitigation measures:** the development of the standard, with attached technological solutions to each indicator and digitalisation level acts as a mitigation measure, as it guides stakeholders on the real goal and fosters the use of digital solutions.

- **Rebound effect:** As highlighted in the TIA report on the Water Resilience Strategy developed by the CoR, there is a risk that efficiency gains could unintentionally lead to higher overall consumption (the "rebound effect") if users perceive water as more abundant. **Mitigation measures:** the Action will ensure that digital monitoring tools (Task 2) are accompanied by clear communication strategies and awareness-raising based on the activities carried out in Action 7 to promote responsible consumption habits.

- **Digital divide:** There is a significant risk that the proposed digital standards are funding schemes will be primarily adopted by larger, wealthier cities with established strategies and dedicated IT departs, while smaller municipalities and rural areas fall further behind. As highlighted in national strategies (e.g., the Smart Cities Concept of the Czech Republic), the administrative and technical capacity to implement smart solutions varies drastically across territories. Without specific safeguards, the standard could unintentionally widen the gap between "smart" hubs and lagging regions. **Mitigation measures:** The A1 level of the standard must be designed with a low-threshold entry level, providing value with minimal technology, while the financing scheme must be accompanied by technical assistance and capacity building.

- **Difficulties in executing the assessment:** Municipalities may encounter difficulties in self-assessing their situation according to the proposed standardisation, as the first version to be used in Task 2 may require corrections or modifications to address unforeseen situations, or doubts or comments may arise while executing the assessment. **Mitigation measures:** the standard should be modified through an iterative process with an open dialog with utility

managers and municipalities, adjusting the result to the reality of their situation and needs.

### 3.7.8 Which members of the UAEU Partnership will be involved in implementation of the Action?

**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).

After a thorough examination of resources and expertise, the following task distribution has been agreed upon by the partners participating in Action 5:

- Task 1.1 requires the commitment of all members: Context includes need and intent of the Action, to be developed by all three municipalities; Assessment of current situation, to be developed by MRD CZ and development of the Content of the standard, to be developed by CETAQUA.
- Task 1.2, the standardisation will be developed by all three municipalities, based on the indicator set to be delivered by an external expert and on the standardisation being developed by the Expert Group on Digital Water Systems Management from Water Europe. CETAQUA will provide scientific and technological assessment of the standard, while the MRD CZ will take the role of implementation feasibility of the standard.
- Task 1.3, financing scheme, will be developed with the participation of all three municipalities in its development and in synergy with Action 2 of the Action Plan, as it covers in depth related aspects.
- Task 2, on the implementation of the standard and guidelines by assessing water companies is to be developed by all three municipalities with the external participation of the water companies they have contact with. It is also open to be implemented in other municipalities and water companies.

### 3.7.9 Territorial Impact Assessment

Territorial Impact Assessments aim to assess how EU legislation, policies and programmes might affect different places and types of territories differently — for example by creating urban-rural disparities, regional gaps in implementation capacity, or systemic advantages

for better-resourced areas. These assessments can use both qualitative and quantitative methods to identify which territories are most exposed to positive or negative impacts, thereby supporting better-informed policy design and implementation.

For this Action, two main territorial imbalances have been identified, that can hinder or delay implementation in less developed areas:

- **Municipality size:** metropolitan municipalities and larger municipalities have a clear resource advantage, both economically and personnel capacity, with dedicated IT departments, robust data infrastructure, and the financial capacity to implement complex smart water solutions. In contrast, smaller municipalities and rural areas often lack not only the capital for hardware but, more critically, the specialized administrative capacity and human resources to manage such systems. This rises a risk of disproportionately benefit larger municipalities, while leaving smaller, resource-constrained municipalities further behind.
- **Digital divide:** as indicated by various national and regional analyses across Member States, the baseline for "digital maturity" varies dramatically not just between countries, but specifically between urban centres and rural areas. A low digital baseline that rural and smaller municipalities present might discourage or delay the implementation of the standard.

The identified risks can be mitigated by the correct and broader implementation of the stepwise digitalisation strategy proposed in the present Action or further European Commission developments based on it. This is achieved by:

- **The Stepwise Approach:** To address those risks, the Action explicitly incorporates a TIA perspective by designing the Stepwise Water Digitalization Standard (Levels A1-C2). This mechanism acts as a tool for territorial cohesion:
- **Inclusivity:** It will provide a realistic entry point (Level A1) for municipalities with limited resources, focusing on basic processes without requiring expensive high-tech infrastructure.
- **Progression:** It will outline a clear roadmap for gradual improvement, allowing less developed territories to modernize at a sustainable pace.
- **Improvement of municipal capacity and iterative process:** The developed standard and related funding scheme must be subject to an iterative process, where, after a financing call is finished, weaknesses, entry barriers and other factors that micht hinder its adoption by smaller municipalities must be addressed for the improvement of the standard and financing scheme. During task 2 of the implementation of the Action, said iterative process will be put to the test.
- **Funding scheme** must include training and technical support for each level.

### 3.7.10 Are you aware of any existing Territorial Impact Assessment in relation to certain EU legislative initiatives, which may be relevant for this Action?

Legislation and policies may often have unintended impacts at different spatial levels. The aim of Territorial Impact Assessment (TIAs) is to identify whether a policy, regulation or legislation has an asymmetric territorial impact. A TIA can be performed as either ex-ante or ex-post activity[7] (ESPON, 2025).

Although systematic TIAs are not yet standard practice for all EU legislative proposals, tools developed within the ESPON framework support early identification of potential territorial impacts of new EU policies. These tools have been used to highlight regions that might face asymmetric effects from EU directives, and pilot applications under the Territorial Agenda 2030 have explored territorial effects in cross-border contexts.

In the context of this Action, the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) has published a TIA report on the European Water Resilience Strategy, based on the ESPON framework and tools. Many relevant insights can be extracted from the report.

As stated in the report, "(...) the strategy has substantial but uneven territorial implications, determined by regional climatic and bio-geo- hydrological conditions, infrastructure maturity, economic structures and, more notably, the 'starting point' of each region." This also holds true for the current Action, as previous digitalisation status affects how quickly higher digitalisation levels can be achieved, and should be addressed through a robust establishment of lower digitalisation levels and financing scheme.

It is stated that the effects that a goal such as **+10% water efficiency improvement** might be of great benefit and easily achievable in some regions, while cost-benefit in other regions might not be as high. To improve the territorial impact, considering the differences between European regions, some recommendations are made which may be relevant for Action 5:

- The establishment of **"territorially differentiated targets**" requires "clear and enforceable monitoring mechanisms". Said mechanisms could be digital tools as the ones to be proposed in the current Action, either by their direct measurements or through derived metrics.

- The **prioritization of funding for territories where vulnerabilities (and benefits) are higher** or double has a direct effect on the financing scheme to be developed in task 1.3, as there is a proposal on zoning, clustering similar regions that could also move digitalisation financing to specific target regions.

- The recommendation to "**integrate existing data and collect new data**" might influence the technological solutions to be implemented, as diverse manufactures with a diversity of tools, data sets and data structures have a clear

[7] https://www.espon.eu/support/territorial-impact-assessments

impact on the ability to integrate data sets and to aggregate them at higher than local levels, hindering clear monitoring of indicators at the EU level.

- Furthermore, the report identifies a critical "double vulnerability": **regions facing the highest climate risks often possess the most outdated infrastructure and lack the financial means to modernize.** It explicitly warns that while digital tools offer benefits, they "require substantial initial investment, which not all LRAs (Local and Regional Authorities) have the fiscal capacity to deliver". This finding directly validates the necessity of the proposed Financing Scheme (Task 1.3) to enable the implementation of the Standard in less developed regions.

- Additionally, the report emphasizes that **current monitoring based on NUTS-3 level data is insufficient for effective management.** It specifically calls for the **integration of municipal datasets**, which are currently fragmented. This directly supports our Action's objective to establish data standards at the local level, bridging the critical gap between high-level EU statistics and on-the-ground reality.

While the CoR report highlights the territorial dimension of water resilience, the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) provides quantitative evidence of the gaps in digital readiness. DESI consistently reveals significant disparities in connectivity, human capital, and digital public services across the EU. Furthermore, national strategic documents (such as the National Concepts for Smart Cities in various Member States) confirm that these disparities are even more pronounced at the local level (urban vs. rural). This existing knowledge confirms that a rigid, high-tech standard would be unimplementable for many territories and validates the need for the proposed Stepwise Standard, which allows municipalities to align with EU digital goals at a pace that corresponds to their specific "digital maturity" level defined by these indices.

### 3.7.11 Are there any EU legislative initiatives or proposals that may result in considerable spatial imbalances, which are relevant for this Action?

Several EU policy frameworks, while designed to support harmonised objectives, may create spatial imbalances during implementation. For example, Cohesion Policy seeks to reduce regional disparities, yet the capacity to absorb funds and deploy digital solutions can differ markedly between regions with stronger technical skills and smaller or resource-constrained municipalities.

Similarly, water quality and integrated water management requirements derived from the Water Framework Directive are implemented unevenly across Member States and territories, partly due to differences in digital readiness and data management capacity. Recognising these spatial imbalances underscores the importance of a stepwise water digitalisation standard that is sensitive to territorial differences and supports balanced implementation across all types of municipalities.

Beyond these general disparities, upcoming legislation poses direct challenges to smaller territories, creating a risk of a "two-speed" implementation:

- **Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive (UWWTD) Recast**: This directive extends monitoring and reporting obligations to smaller agglomerations (1,000 p.e.). This creates a structural economic disadvantage: large utilities can amortize the costs of digital monitoring systems (SCADA) over a large customer base. In contrast, for small municipalities, the "fixed cost" of compliance per capita is significantly higher. Without the accessible digital tools proposed in Level A1 of our Standard, these municipalities risk non-compliance simply due to lack of administrative scale.

- **Nature Restoration Regulation**: The NRR introduces binding targets for urban green space and tree canopy cover. Monitoring progress towards these targets requires data-driven approaches (e.g., GIS analysis, remote sensing). While "Smart Cities" often have established sensor networks and data teams, rural and smaller towns lack the technical infrastructure to measure and report on these indicators efficiently, potentially excluding them from green infrastructure funding.

- **Data Act & Interoperability Europe Act**: These initiatives aim to foster a single market for data but presuppose a level of digital maturity (machine-readable formats, APIs). Many smaller public authorities still operate with legacy data systems or unstructured formats (e.g., PDFs), making them technically unable to participate in European common data spaces without the "translation layer" and standardisation that this Action provides.

As the aim of EU legislation and initiatives, particularly the Water Resilience Strategy, is to both harmonise the compliance status of member states and to protect and assure water resources and risk mitigation in a climate change scenario (i.e., resilience), the forementioned Cohesion Policy, related funding in the Multiannual Financial Framework should take into account the spatial imbalances and promote, both through funding and capacity building, the implementation of digital solutions and digital standardisation in water management, either by adopting the standardisation to be developed or by building and improving on it.

## 3.8 Action N° 06 – Knowledge and capacity-building


This Action aims to raise awareness and share knowledge on the concept of Water Sensitive Cities (WSC) and work of the WSC Partnership, which includes the identification and dissemination of good practices, and the delivery of capacity building materials and activities.

Based on a **knowledge gap analysis/training needs assessment** on implementing the WSC concept and the identified good practices, capacity-building materials and activities will take various forms, such as webinars, podcasts, trainings/peer-to-peer learning pilots. Additionally, the Action Group will connect and contribute with content to **EU water-related Academy initiatives.**

**Targeted stakeholders/governance level**: technical staff and political representatives in local (and regional) governments; Wider audience of professionals working in water management, urban planning, water policy, housing, nature/biodiversity, disaster risk reduction, economic promotion, etc; International/European, national and local government networks

**Deadline**: 30 November 2027

### 3.8.1 Which of the three pillars is this Action contributing to?

| Action 6: Relevance to the 3 Pillars of the UAEU | |
|---|---|
|  Better regulation | By raising awareness about the WSC concept and providing additional knowledge to local, regional and national levels, this Action will indirectly contribute to better governance mechanisms and regulation in this area. **10%** |
|  Better funding | By raising awareness about the WSC concept and providing additional knowledge to local, regional and national levels, this Action will indirectly contribute to the design of better funding mechanisms in this area. **10%** |
|  Better knowledge | This Action focuses on the **development of knowledge and capacity** on the WSC concept and its practical applications to increase the understanding of water challenges and solutions. Thus, it fosters learning both at professional and institutional levels, enabling more sustainable water practices.<br>It also contributes to the **creation, transfer, and operationalisation of knowledge**. Through training programmes, peer-learning, and access to best practices, stakeholders are better equipped to deliver on the goals of WSC. **80%** |

### 3.8.2 What is the specific problem this Action is aiming to address?

The Orientation Paper already highlighted the **limited understanding of the WSC concept and its practical applications, as well as a gap in training and technical skills** as key barriers for its deployment.

**Limited knowledge and evidence sharing on the WSC concept.** Without a clear and shared understanding of WSC, supported by accessible knowledge and practical tools, the concept risks remaining abstract. A fundamental barrier to the development of WSC is the limited understanding of what the concept truly means in practice. Many local authorities, policy makers, professionals like urban planners, and other stakeholders are not fully familiar with the principles of WSC and the types of actions that can translate challenges (such as urban flooding, pollution, or scarcity) into opportunities for innovation and resilience. This conceptual gap contributes to a lack of political traction and prioritisation of WSC measures. Moreover, many professionals lack the necessary training, technical skills, and cross-sectoral experience to implement integrated or nature-based solutions and

citizen engagement effectively. This applies in particular to stakeholders outside urban water management, as highlighted by the Ex-ante Assessment report. Research on water-sensitive approaches remains fragmented, and dissemination of findings is limited, resulting in poor transfer of knowledge across regions and cities an indecisiveness in spatial or infrastructural choices. Mechanisms to share best practices, build peer-to-peer learning networks, and scale up successful models are underdeveloped.

**Urban environments continue to be developed in ways that increase water-related risks rather than mitigate them.** Urban planning practices often fail to incorporate water-sensitive design principles. In many countries, there is no legal obligation to integrate NbS in new developments or retrofits, and urban densification further limits the space available for green and blue infrastructure. Furthermore, some technical standards, such as those for fire safety or mobility, can conflict with the implementation of NbS.

To overcome these challenges, enhancing learning opportunities and providing skills training are essential. Strengthening the capacity of local institutions, especially in small and medium-sized municipalities, through tailored programs and peer-to-peer training will help to promote best practices and ensure effective implementation of WSC measures. Online or physical knowledge-sharing events or platforms can further facilitate the transfer of successful models across regions and cities.

### 3.8.3 Which existing EU policies, legislations or instruments are relevant for this Action?

- **Water Resilience Strategy (WRS)** – Recognises governance, financing, and community empowerment as key to building climate-resilient urban water systems. A flagship Action of the WRS is the creation of a European Water Academy "to address capacity needs in Europe's water sector, fostering public-private partnerships, innovation, and technology transfer to fill skill gaps".
- **European Green Deal** – Encourages behavioural change, participatory policy, and sustainable investment strategies.
- **EU Climate Adaptation Strategy** – Highlights inclusive governance, awareness raising, and inter-municipal coordination for climate-resilient planning.
- **Cohesion Policy** – Aims to reduce disparities in access to financing, technical capacity, and environmental resilience across EU regions.
- **New Leipzig Charter** – Emphasises integrated, participatory, and place-based governance in urban transformation.
- **SDGs** (particularly SDG 6, 11, and 13) – Promote clean water and sanitation, sustainable cities, and climate action.

### 3.8.4 Why is this Action needed?

The WSC concept provides local governments with integrated approaches to urban water management and solutions for climate adaptation, in terms of increasing situations of prolonged droughts and water shortages, heatwaves, extreme rainfall and flooding, and for circular approaches recognising water as a valuable resource. Additionally, it produces co-benefits in the areas of health and wellbeing for citizens, more efficient resource use and thus fewer emissions, and biodiversity.

The concept connects urban water management to sectors it is intrinsically linked with, such as climate change adaptation, disaster risk reduction, urban planning, housing, nature, biodiversity, and industry, and connects urban water management to its spatial settings, taking the water-basin into account.

For these reasons, raising awareness about the WSC concept and providing concrete capacity building materials and actions to staff in local (and regional) governments, the wider audience of professionals working in water management, urban planning, water policy, etc. and national local administration networks is paramount for **mainstreaming WSC solutions and their deployment, which will ultimately make our cities more resilient and increase quality of life.**

### 3.8.5 How will the Action be implemented?

Action Group 6 will deliver:

**1. Activities aimed raising awareness and knowledge sharing** on the concept of Water Sensitive Cities (WSC) and the work of the WSC Partnership. These activities entail framing existing knowledge and practices under this concept, as well as ensuring a wide outreach of the Partnership's outputs, as described below:

- **Compiling and sharing good practices** in various formats and sharing them via different channels: This includes internal good practices (shared by WSC partners) as well as external good practices across the themes of a) infrastructure (Green-Grey-Infrastructure, Sponge City concepts, etc.), b) community engagement, c) financing models, d) multi-level governance, and e) digitalisation. The good practices will be shared via different channels, events and used for capacity-building activities.

- **Seeking synergies and creation of joint actions with related initiatives** (such as EUROCITIES, ERRIN or Water Europe), and leveraging the events/conferences and workshops organised by the partners of the Partnership for communication purposes.

- **Recommendations for mainstreaming the WSC Cities concept** within municipal administrations will be provided based on external expertise support. Additionally, a list of existing resources and knowledge on the WSC concept for local governments will be compiled, and integrated in the urban planning

framework. This list will contain existing repositories, as well as resources supporting WSC implementation.

- **Contributing to planning and development of communication and dissemination activities** aligned with the timeline of the Partnership via the UAEU, EUI, and other official channels (e.g. DG ENV newsletter), with direct support from EUI. Different informative materials like online flyers, presentations, videos or podcast will be created to raise awareness about the WSC Partnership and the WSC concept. These materials will be produced based on the partners' resources, resources provided by EUI, as well as in synergies with related initiatives.

**2. Capacity-building materials and activities.**

- Preparation of capacity building materials and activities will be informed about a **"capacity gap report"** (including results from the Eurocities' PULSE on Climate Resilience), which will be produced with external expertise support from EUI. This report will provide skill gaps, organisational bottlenecks, priority learning formats, and deliver a questionnaire proposal for training needs assessment.

- This report and the developed questionnaire will be used as basis for identifying the **skills gaps and training needs** of municipal policymakers and staff profiles/municipal employees/technicians from different departments related to local water management, like urban planning and housing, economic promotion, energy, tourism, public procurement, etc. in WSC Partner organisations. This assessment will be based on desk research and interviews.

- Based on knowledge gap analysis/training needs assessment on implementing the WSC concept, different **capacity-building materials and activities** will be produced. Among others, the materials (webinars, podcasts, etc.) and trainings/peer-to-peer learning pilots will be based on the Partnership's internal and external good practices and outputs of the other Action Groups.

- Additionally, the Action Group will **connect and contribute** with content to water-related Academy initiatives like the upcoming European Water Academy (part of the Water Resilience Strategy) and/or the future EIT Water KIC and its training/academy activities.

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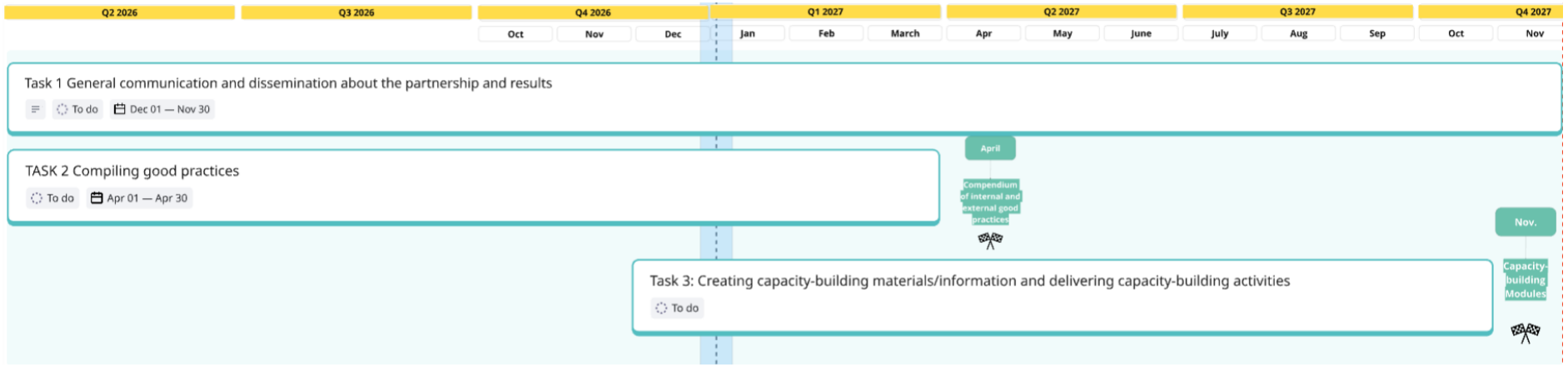
| Task | Description / Sub-tasks | Outputs |
|---|---|---|
| **TASK 1: Awareness raising and knowledge sharing about WSC concept and work of the WSC Partnership** | 1.1 Creation of a communication and dissemination plan [Dec 2025 – April 2026]<br><br>1.2 Creation of WSC communication and knowledge materials [Dec 2025 – Nov. 2027] | Pre Action Plan Output: Communication and Dissemination Plan (based on recommendations for mainstreaming the WSC concept)<br><br>Deadline: Apr.2026<br><br>During the execution of the Action Plan different Communication and knowledge materials will be produced and later integrated in the Capacity Building Program for Cities, such as: 3 WSC videos/webinars; 2 podcasts; Presentations in each country of the WSC Partnership; 1 presentation at EU-policy related events such as EWRC, the Mission Forum, or Cities Forum and 1 presentation at an EU-Water platform like Water Europe or Water Resilience Forum; List of existing resources and knowledge on WSC [April 2026] with external expertise support from EUI. |
| **TASK 2: Compiling good practices [April 2026 – April 2027** | 2.1 Good practices template and external good practice sheets, with external expertise support from EUI [Apr. 2026]<br><br>2.2. Internal good practice sheets [Dec. 2026]<br><br>2.3 Integration of Good Practices collection from other Actions [April 2027] | **Output 10: WSC Good Practices Compendium**<br><br>Deadline: April 2027 |
| **TASK 3: Creating capacity-building materials and delivering** | 3.1 Knowledge gap analysis/training needs assessment [Apr. – Oct. 2026]<br><br>3.2 Production of capacity-building materials and capacity- | **Output 11**: **Capacity-building Modules**<br><br>Organising a "Knowledge and Capacity-building Final Event WSC" (for instance at the |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **capacity-building activities [April 2026 – Nov. 2027]** | building training formats [Nov. 2026 – Nov. 2027]<br><br>3.3 Advocacy: Establishing synergies with related capacity-building initiatives at EU level (European Water Academy, EIT Water KIC, possibly EU Cities Platform) [Jan. – Nov. 2027]. | Cities Forum or EWRC), as well, as a Close-out Report that will include questionnaires feedback, clipping and other information to support the Impact Evaluation of the Action Plan overall activities.<br><br>Deadline: November 2027 |

**Fig. 8 Implementation timeline for Action 6**



### 3.8.6 What resources are needed?

This Action mainly requires the active involvement of the WSC Action Group partners for creating the materials and outputs mentioned above, and their connections to related initiatives, platforms and networks for creating joint actions and synergies. Additionally, the cooperation among the whole WSC Partnership will be needed for input to the awareness raising and knowledge sharing activities, as well as for the capacity-building materials and activities.

EUI resources will be used for general communication activities.

**External expertise** will be required at the start of the Action for knowledge mapping and initial external good practices identification, and a capacity needs report, which will set the basis for further skills gaps and needs assessment and the training activities. Additional external expertise requests may be needed for layouts and/or specific formats for training materials, as well as for the production of additional knowledge and awareness-raising materials.

### 3.8.7 Are there any foreseen risks?

- **Project management**: Low engagement by partners, lack of coordination to split the effort among members and to ensure coherence. **Mitigation measures:** maintaining fluent communication via emails, online and physical meetings between action group members, as well with the WSC Partnership coordination to identify disengagement early, verify capacity and assign tasks depending on specific skills, planning periodic checking of the status of the work.
- **Economic-social and environmental context/fluctuation**: as this can vary sensibly in urban contexts and includes a degree of unpredictability (e.g. climate change), it is challenging to propose content that is easily and equally relatable and useful for all recipients. **Mitigation measures:** frame in the best possible way the content with the support of the external expertise, include inputs and support from all partners, select a variety of good practices that are not too specific nor too general, produce communication materials with different tone of voice, message and complexity to reach a wider, composite audience.
- **Political support***:* this can be lower in certain areas, reducing the impact of the Action. **Mitigation measures**: produce materials that are grounded in scientific and technical evidence, in simple, neutral and meaningful ways, emphasising the positive returns (in different public spheres) that a WSC approach brings.

### 3.8.8 Which members of the UAEU Partnership will be involved in implementation of the Action?

**Action Leader: Acondicionamiento Tarrasense Associación - LEITAT**

**Partners**:

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

### 3.8.9 Are you aware of any existing Territorial Impact Assessment in relation to certain EU legislative initiatives, which may be relevant for this Action?

A Territorial Impact Assessment (TIA) report on the Water Resilience Strategy was recently published by the European Committee of the Regions – see more details under Action 2 – Enabling Regulations. The implications and recommendations of the report will be carefully considered.

## 3.9 Action N° 07 – Community Engagement


**Action 7** 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. A WSC Community Challenge Campaign provides a proof of concept of the effectiveness of community engagement in creating water sensitive cities.** At the same time, this action outlines an array of citizen and community engagement practices related to urban water issues (as a common resource, infrastructure, use, etc.). This aims 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.

**Targeted stakeholders/governance level:** Citizens and communities, businesses

**Deadline:** November 30, 2027

### 3.9.1 Which of the three pillars is this Action contributing to?

| Action 7: Relevance to the 3 Pillars of the UAEU | |
|---|---|
|  Better regulation | Data provided by citizen science provide policy makers with additional insights which could lead to better regulation. New approaches, solutions, and institutions can be absorbed into innovative regulatory framework, that embrace and address the complexity of urban water systems. **15%** |
|  Better funding | Citizen science produces insights that help in the identification of needs, facilitating allocation/request of funding. Data produced and citizen participation provide unique opportunities to analyse local contexts but also to find shared, European, challenges in urban areas that can be better supported and framed through dedicated funding. Furthermore, citizen science can lead to innovative solutions and practices. **10%** |
|  Better knowledge | The water sensitive city has a civil engineering, landscape design and social component. The development of knowledge about the effectiveness of citizen science to create engagement equips authorities with a social tool to deliver a water sensitive urban environment. This social approach about behavioural change complements engineering, planning and digital instruments.<br><br>A better understanding of drivers, incentives and barriers for change to perform water sensitive behaviour will lead to more effective, behavioural change targeted communication campaigns and educational programmes. **75%** |

### 3.9.2 What is the specific problem this Action is aiming to address?

**Creating a water sensitive urban environment requires more than technical or nature-based solutions.** It calls for long-term behavioural change and dialogue among citizens, stakeholders and governments. Although not explicitly listed among the sub-topics suggested in the EEA assessment, community engagement is highlighted as key to fostering a culture of water stewardship. Engagement is often aimed at creating awareness. However, **awareness does not necessarily lead to action**. Particularly when changing habits is perceived as a loss of comfort and privileges. A fun Challenge Campaign based on citizen science can prompt a change of behaviour. This can successively lead to awareness about one's active role in the complex and interconnected water system. When citizens perform or demand a certain behaviour this might motivate politicians to follow with stricter policies and regulations.

In many cases, engagement is viewed as a one-way communication tool rather than an opportunity for co-creation and shared responsibility. If it's organised by means of citizen science it can make two wins with one move, since the collected data can improve insights on water related issues.

Furthermore, there is a **lack of incentives or institutional frameworks to support inclusive multi-actor collaboration.** And there is a lack of knowledge about drivers, incentives and barriers for change to perform water sensitive behaviour.

Citizens, **local communities and businesses are not enough aware of the complexity of water systems in an urban context**. At the same time, cities need a better understanding of their citizens to better address challenges and needs. Data driven, behavioural change targeted and at the same time fun and engaging activities can stir the change by positively influencing water sensitive behaviour, stimulate new approaches and solutions, and expose the necessary insights on water related issues.

In addition, by providing (a) a map of tested alternatives and good practices in citizen and community participation in urban water projects, and (b) an indicative (non-exhaustive) list of WSC policy areas particularly suited to citizen engagement, policymakers, water companies, specialists, and other stakeholders are enabled to design and implement integrated WSC policies. These policies can build on and further adapt existing examples, scaling participation from the individual to the communal level, from everyday practices to institutional processes, and from deliberative processes to co-design.

### 3.9.3 Which existing EU policies, legislations or instruments are relevant for this Action?

- **Water Resilience Strategy** – Recognises community empowerment as key to building climate-resilient urban water systems. One of the strategy's objectives is to build a water-smart economy together with citizens and economic actors in a way that supports EU competitiveness. Another objective is to empower citizens for water resilience.
- **European Green Deal** also encourages behavioural change towards a greener Europe.
- **EU Climate Adaptation Strategy** – Highlights awareness raising for climate-resilient planning. The strategy focuses on the objective of faster adaptation by using better data and tools to guide actions. And on the objective of faster adaptation by developing solutions to secure water resources.
- With JRC as one of the partners in this Partnership the **Competence Centre on Behavioural Insights is very relevant**. Relevant focus areas of the CCBI for this Action are Resilient Society and Sustainable Transitions. We can make use of their knowledge and contribute to their knowledge.
- Confirming the importance of participatory, collaborative approaches, the **European Competence Centre on Participatory and Deliberative Democracy** has been implemented: a platform and a community of practice to respond to the increasing demand from the European Commission, EU institutions

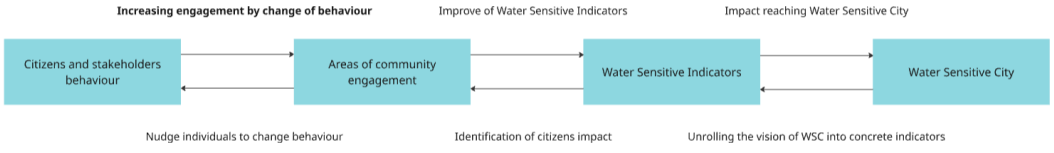
and countries for capacity to support participatory and deliberative projects and policies at the EU level. Despite seeking for a more complex level of engagement and commitment, it integrates the idea of informing and giving the chance to all citizens to understand and contribute in practice.

- **Last but not least, the space given to community engagement activities in EU-funded projects** (i.e. living lab, citizen science approaches) and existing toolkit offer case studies and inspiring stories that confirm the effectiveness of such approaches.
- **EU Green Capital focuses on citizen engagement and participation.**
- **New European Bauhaus (NEB)** is a policy and funding initiative that makes green transition in built environments and beyond enjoyable, attractive and convenient for all. The New European Bauhaus works by engaging people at a grassroots level, providing tools and guidance, incorporating the views of various stakeholders into the process of design and implementation, prioritising people and social inclusion but also the economy to boost competitiveness and EU strategic autonomy. It has dedicated components focusing on community empowerment, works in co-creation and bottom up. The NEW Academy combines the New European Bauhaus values of sustainability, aesthetics and inclusiveness, accelerating the fair and green transformation of the building sector.

### 3.9.4 Why is this Action needed?

Action 7 aims at **getting insights on the use of data-based citizen science with the (co-)benefit of behaviour-change**. It will show through data that these kinds of engagement activities have an effect on becoming a water sensitive city. At the same time, by providing tested and well-established examples and frameworks of citizen engagement and active water communities or networks, municipalities and water operators are enabled to imagine and develop platforms and methods that meaningfully accommodate and mobilise citizen engagement within integrated and sustainable water management systems, fostering citizen stewardship.

**Action 7 frames community engagement as an integral and necessary component of becoming a water sensitive city.** It links engagement directly to water sensitivity indicators, enabling the translation of the concept of a water-sensitive city into tangible practices and providing insight into behaviour change among citizens and stakeholders. Such engagement actions contribute in turn to improvements in water sensitivity indicators and, in sum, move the city closer to becoming a water-sensitive city.




In particular, Action 7 **addresses the gap between community engagement and behaviour.** Engagement is often aimed at creating awareness. However, awareness does not necessarily lead to a change of behaviour. Especially when the desired behaviour

means giving up one's privileges, or when hits institutional, operational and decision making barriers. Therefore, Action 7 focuses on behavioural changing engagement by designing a fun challenge on water-related issues. A framework for a community engagement challenge based on relevant indicators to become a water sensitive city helps authorities design attractive and effective data-driven campaigns to change the behaviour of its citizens and businesses. It stimulates innovation and creates a base for common understanding.

**A better understanding of drivers, incentives and barriers for change to perform water sensitive behaviour will lead to more effective, behavioural change targeted communication campaigns and educational programmes.** Authorities will be provided with guidelines for associated communication means and educational programmes to motivate communities to change their behaviour related to water. Complementarily, a practical guide to co-design processes, participatory platforms, and mechanisms for pooling water- and knowledge-related resources can support the mainstreaming of water-sensitive behavioural change in urban planning and policymaking. By activating social innovation around water as a common good, such a guide can enhance systemic impact, support replication and upscaling, and strengthen the long-term sustainability of WSC policies.

Action 7 also draws up guidelines for authorities to use the collected data and working paradigms by the challenge to become more water sensitive as a city.

If more cities adopt such approaches, it will be possible to have a better overview of common needs and challenges, pushing for new and common approaches and policies.

### 3.9.5 How will the Action be implemented?

Addressing the gap between community engagement and water sensitive behaviour, Action 7 focuses on citizens as **key drivers of bottom-up change that can influence the overall achievement of a Water Sensitive City.** This includes both direct water sensitive actions undertaken by citizens (such as behavioural changes within households, private property management, and impacts on water use in businesses, etc.), as well as increased self-efficacy to influence the broader system (through decision-making processes, participation in planning, etc.). The *Challenge*, as a fundamental output of this action, therefore, serves both to inform about the meaning of community engagement in water management and to test behavioural change.

**Table of tasks, sub-tasks and outputs**

| Task | Description / Sub-tasks | Outputs |
|---|---|---|
| **Task 1: Creating a framework for a data driven, attractive and engaging challenge to increase water** | **1.1** Creating a definition of water sensitive behaviour on a citizen, community and organisational level<br>**1.2** Mapping existing initiatives or projects on changing behaviour through the use of data | **Output 12**: Framework for Challenge and Toolbox for Communication<br>A data driven, attractive and engaging challenge framework that local authorities and institutions |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **sensitive behaviour.** | **1.3** Identifying most relevant topics of digitally measurable indicators regarding water sensitivity that can be influenced by human behaviour.<br><br>These will be extracted from the preliminary set of indicators with technological devices for their measurement attached, delivered by external expertise within Action 1 and 5.<br><br>**1.4** Performing desk research to identify drivers, incentives and barriers for change to perform water sensitive behaviour. These drivers give direction to the set up of the challenge and the content and design of the communication means. Check within the partnership if the identified drivers, incentives and barriers are applicable on a European scale. If we won't succeed in defining a robust set of drivers a possible alternative would be to propose some drivers as hypothetical drivers and put them to the test in Task 2.<br><br>**1.5** Analysing collected data from previous tasks on promising behaviour changes and pragmatic feasibility. Decide on the desired performed behaviour within the Challenge.<br><br>**1.6** Draw the requirements for a data driven, attractive and engaging Challenge/Campaign to increase water sensitive behaviour<br><br>**1.7** Collect inspiring measures the targeted groups can take to change their behaviour and contribute to the challenge and achieve the goals. Which goals and which measures depend on the chosen targeted behaviour and requirements. Performed by desk research<br><br>**1.8** Create attractive communication and promotional means to engage citizens with the challenge.<br><br>**1.9** Setting up the challenge and implementation. Campaign: Challenge among targeted | in Europe can implement to increase water sensitive behaviour among communities and a Toolbox with attractive communicational and promotional will be developed, potentially with external expertise support<br><br>Deadline: December 2026 |

| | | |
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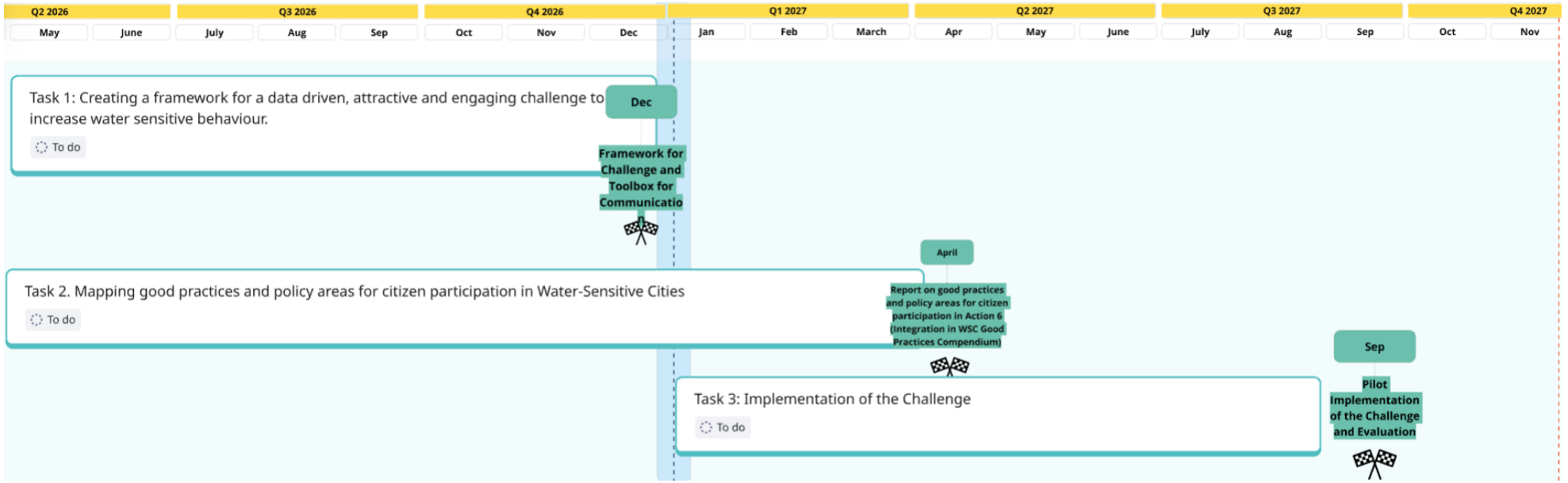
| | communities in cities related to WSC, supported by a communication campaign and educational programme<br><br>**1.10** Translate the citizen science collected data (through the challenge) into applicable information for local authorities to make their cities more water sensitive<br><br>**1.11** Monitor and evaluate the impacts and effectiveness of the several challenges at local level. Analyse whether the challenges are a proven way of things, replicable and to be further promoted in Europe. (Evaluate, Learn and Share)<br><br>**1.12** Adjust framework based on the insights of 1.11 | |
| **Task 2: Mapping good practices and policy areas for citizen participation in Water-Sensitive Cities (WSC)**<br><br>**[May 2026 – April. 2027 ]** | **2.1 – Mapping Methodology and Framework**<br><br>Develop a robust methodology for mapping participation practices and policy areas, including:<br><br>**2.2 – Mapping of Good Practices**<br><br>Conduct a systematic mapping of good practices in citizen participation across:<br>• Urban water planning and design<br>• Operational and governance processes<br>• Policy-making and regulation<br><br>**2.3 – Evaluation Matrix and Conclusions**<br><br>Develop an evaluation matrix to assess the mapped participation practices based on: Effectiveness, Inclusiveness, Scalability, Institutional feasibility, and sustainability Based on the matrix, provide consolidated conclusions and recommendations on which participation approaches are most | **Report on good practices and policy areas for citizen participation** in Water-Sensitive Cities to be integrated in Output 10 from Action 6 (WSC Good Practices Compendium)<br><br>Deadline: April 2027 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | promising for WSC policy integration, how they can be adapted potential barriers and enablers for implementation<br><br>**2. 4 – Mapping Digital Tools for Participation and Citizen Engagement**<br><br>Identify and map digital tools and platforms that support participatory processes, including:<br>• citizen engagement apps and platforms,<br>• collaborative mapping tools,<br>• digital co-design and consultation systems,<br>• community monitoring and data-sharing platforms.<br><br>**Performed by: Municipality of Chalandri, Commonspace Co-op** | |
| **Task 3: Implementation of the Challenge** | **3.1** Presenting the Challenge methodology and supporting Materials and tools to the participation city (cities)<br><br>**3.2** Provide Guidance and support in the implementation of the challenge (monthly meeting to gather feedback)<br><br>**3.3** Evaluation of the Implementation – lessons learned | **Output 13:** Pilot Implementation of the Challenge and Evaluation by Q3 2027<br><br>Deadline: September 2027. |

**Fig. 9 Implementation timeline for Action 7**



### 3.9.6 What resources are needed?

This Action requires at first the active involvement of the WSC Action Group partners for:

- Defining water sensitive behaviour
- Identifying the most relevant indicators developed by Action 1 and associated digitalisation standards developed by Action 5;
- Drawing the requirements for a data driven, attractive and engaging challenge to increase water sensitive behaviour;
- Creating a framework for a Community Challenge.
- Mapping good practices and policy areas for citizen participation in water sensitive cities

Once the framework is set up, we will need to pilot the challenge among different stakeholders in at least 3 municipalities connected to the partnership. The cities of Turin, Enschede and Elche have confirmed they will roll out the challenge among one of the target groups. Additional cooperation from the whole WSC Partnership might be needed.

Graphic design expertise to create attractive communication and promotional means to engage citizens with the challenge. This might be required from external experts.

Expertise on behavioural science and social psychology of sustainable, water sensitive behaviour to define inspiring measures citizens can take to change their behaviour.

Knowledge on how to translate the through citizen science collected data into applicable information for local authorities to make their cities more water sensitive.

External expertise support to understand drivers, incentives and barriers for change to perform water sensitive behaviour. This can be done by desk research.

External expertise support to map existing initiatives or projects on changing behaviour through the use of data.

### 3.9.7 Are there any foreseen risks?

- **Capacity of cities to adopt/replicate and perform such activities** (time, resources, political views);
- **Flexibility and agility in adopting the proposed citizen-science approaches**;
- **Potential lack of technical support** to ensure integrity and relevance of collected data and need for trained staff to accompany citizens in such activities;
- **Coordination and ability to make the most of the collected data to inform policy and promote behaviour change**;
- **Potential misalignment between data results and proposed Action(s)**;
- **Overambition;**

- **Lack of funding for e.g. the creation of attractive communication means.**

**Mitigation measures:** The Action will consider cities' limited time, resources, and political capacity to adopt and replicate activities.

### 3.9.8 Which members of the UAEU Partnership will be involved in implementation of the Action?

**Action Leader: Gemeente Enschede**

**Partners:**

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

### 3.9.9 Are you aware of any existing Territorial Impact Assessment in relation to certain EU legislative initiatives, which may be relevant for this Action?

A Territorial Impact Assessment (TIA) report on the Water Resilience Strategy was recently published by the European Committee of the Regions – see more details under Action 2 – Enabling Regulations. The implications and recommendations of the report will be carefully considered.

# 4 CONTRIBUTION OF THE ACTION PLAN TO EU COMMITMENTS AND GLOBAL FRAMEWORKS

The Water Sensitive Cities Draft Action Plan contributes directly to the implementation of key **European Union policy priorities** and **global frameworks** by positioning water as a central driver of sustainable, resilient, and climate-adapted urban development.

The proposed Actions presented in the previous chapter operationalise EU strategic objectives under the **European Green Deal**, **EU Missions**, and **Cohesion Policy**, while supporting international commitments on sustainable development, climate action, and urban resilience.

## 4.1 European dimension

### 4.1.1 Cross-cutting issues

The complexity of urban challenges requires integrating different policy aspects to avoid contradictory consequences and make interventions in Urban Areas more effective (Pact of Amsterdam clause 12).

Cross-cutting Issues represent key aspects to be considered in the overall work of the Urban Agenda for the EU and its Partnerships. Each Partnership shall therefore consider the relevance of the Cross-cutting Issues (Gijon Agreement clause 5).

The Cross-cutting issues are:

- Promoting urban policy for the common good, inclusiveness, accessibility, security and equality.
- Enhancing integrated and innovative approaches, notably through financing and in correlation to the green, digital and just transitions.
- Supporting effective urban governance, participation, and co-creation.
- Promoting multi-level governance and cooperation across administrative boundaries.
- Harmonising measures at different spatial levels and implementing place-based policies and strategies.

- Supporting sound and strategic sustainable urban planning, and balanced territorial development.
- Contributing to the acceleration of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda SDGs, the New Urban Agenda and Habitat III principles.

The WSC Action Plan addresses multiple cross-cutting EU priorities through an integrated, place-based approach consistent with the objectives of the **European Green Deal**. In particular, it supports the Green Deal's ambition to enhance climate resilience, protect ecosystems, reduce pollution, and promote sustainable resource management in urban areas.

The Action Plan contributes to the **EU Climate Adaptation Strategy** by addressing water-related climate risks such as flooding, droughts, heat stress, and water scarcity. It is closely aligned with the **EU Mission on Adaptation to Climate Change**, supporting cities and regions in accelerating resilience-building through planning tools, governance frameworks, and investment-ready actions.

Environmental protection and biodiversity restoration are addressed through nature-based solutions, blue-green infrastructure, and ecosystem-based approaches, in line with the **EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030** and the **Zero Pollution Action Plan**. The circular and efficient use of water resources contributes to the **Circular Economy Action Plan**.

The Action Plan also advances the digital transition, guiding cities on their real digitalisation needs and what EU regulation must be complied with, and therefore supporting the implementation of technological solutions related with smart water management systems, digital twins, consistent with the **EU Digital Decade** and the **EU Mission on Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities** objectives.

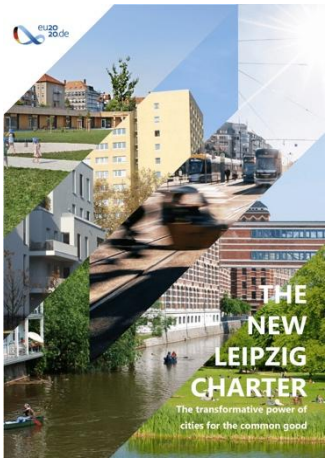
From a territorial perspective, the Action Plan supports the objectives of **Cohesion Policy** by strengthening institutional capacity, reducing territorial disparities, and enhancing the effectiveness of Sustainable Urban Development strategies and place-based climate adaptation measures. It also provides cities and regions with practical tools to better align local priorities and investments with EU funding instruments such as ERDF, Cohesion Fund, LIFE, Horizon Europe, or InvestEU.

**Cross-cutting issues and WSC Actions**

| | Action1 | Action2 | Action 3 | Action 4 | Action 5 | Action 6 | Action 7 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. Promoting urban policy for the common good, inclusiveness, accessibility, security and equality. | | | | | | | |
| b. Enhancing integrated and innovative approaches, notably through financing and in correlation to the green, digital and just transitions. | | | | | | | |
| c. Supporting effective urban governance, participation, and co-creation. | | | | | | | |
| d. Promoting multi-level governance and cooperation across administrative boundaries. | | | | | | | |
| e. Harmonising measures at different spatial levels and implementing place-based policies and strategies. | | | | | | | |
| f. Supporting sound and strategic sustainable urban planning, and balanced territorial development. | | | | | | | |
| g. Contributing to the acceleration of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda SDGs, the New Urban Agenda and Habitat III principles. | | | | | | | |

Legend: blue cell=cross-cutting issue addressed; white cel=cross-cutting issue not addressed.

### 4.1.2 Link to the New Leipzig Charter




The New Leipzig Charter[8] (adopted on 30 November 2020 under German Presidency of the Council of the European Union) provides a key policy framework document for sustainable urban development in Europe. The Charter highlights that cities need to establish integrated and sustainable urban development strategies and ensure their implementation for the city as a whole, from its functional areas to its neighbourhoods. The document is strongly aligned with the Cohesion Policy and its framework for sustainable urban development. Member States agreed to implement the Charter in their national or regional urban policies. The New Leipzig Charter is also accompanied by an Implementing document about the Urban Agenda for the EU.

The WSC Action Plan strongly reflects the principles and transformative dimensions of the **New Leipzig Charter**, particularly its emphasis on **just, green, and productive cities**, supported by integrated and participatory governance.

In relation to the **Just City**, the Draft Action Plan promotes inclusive governance, stakeholder engagement and capacity-building. Actions 6&7 focused on community engagement, multi-level governance and knowledge-sharing contribute to more transparent, participatory and equitable decision-making processes, ensuring that water-related policies and investments respond to local needs and reduce social and territorial inequalities.

The **Green City** dimension is addressed through actions that integrate water sensitivity into urban planning, nature-based solutions, biodiversity protection and climate adaptation strategies. By strengthening blue-green infrastructure, improving water efficiency and enhancing resilience to floods, droughts and heatwaves, this Plan directly supports environmental sustainability, ecosystem restoration and climate resilience, in line with the Charter's vision of climate-neutral and resilient cities.

Regarding the **Productive City**, the WSC Action Plan aims at creating the conditions to support investments in water-sensitive infrastructure, influencing regulatory frameworks and financing mechanisms. Digitalisation also plays a key role in this dimension, with Action 5 promoting and supporting digitalisation in water management and therefore supporting efficiency and reducing costs. This contributes to a more resource-efficient urban metabolism and supports sustainable urban competitiveness.

Overall, the WSC Action Plan operationalises the New Leipzig Charter by translating its principles into concrete tools, actions and policy recommendations that help cities and regions deliver just, green and productive urban development through water-sensitive approaches.

[8] Source: New Leipzig Charter - The transformative power of cities for the common good (2020). Link

# 4.2 Global (International) dimension

## 4.2.1 New Urban Agenda (Habitat III)


The New Urban Agenda was adopted at the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) in Quito, Ecuador, on 20 October 2016. It was endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly at its sixty-eighth plenary meeting of the seventy-first session on 23 December 2016[9].

The New Urban Agenda represents a shared vision for a better and more sustainable future. If well-planned and well-managed, urbanization can be a powerful tool for sustainable development for both developing and developed countries.

The New Urban Agenda (Habitat III) and the UAEU are interlinked instruments at global and macroregional levels which foster a shared approach to sustainable urban development[10].

The core of the NUA is its Implementation Plan, which is divided into two sections:

- Transformative Commitments (*NUA paragraphs 23 to 80*); and
- Effective Implementation (*NUA paragraphs 81 to 160*).

### A. Transformative Commitments

The UAEU contributes to the NUA Transformative Commitments for Sustainable Urban Development. The Transformative Commitments are grouped under the following three categories:

- Sustainable urban development for social inclusion and ending poverty (NUA paragraphs 25-42); and
- Sustainable and inclusive urban prosperity and opportunities for all (NUA paragraphs 43-62); and
- Environmentally sustainable and resilient urban development (NUA paragraphs 63-80).

[9] Source: The New Urban Agenda (2016). Link

[10] Review of the contributions of the Urban Agenda for the EU to the implementation of the New Urban Agenda (2021). Link

### B. Effective Implementation

The NUA outlines five main pillars: (1) national urban policies, (2) urban legislation and regulations, (3) urban planning and design, (4) local economy and municipal finance, and (5) local implementation. These pillars are laid out across the following three sub-sections:

- Building the Urban Governance Structure: Establishing a Supportive Framework (NUA paragraphs 85-92)
- Planning and Managing Urban Spatial Development (NUA paragraphs 93-125)
- Means of Implementation (NUA paragraphs 126-160).

The Water Sensitive Cities (WSC) Action Plan contributes directly to the implementation of the New Urban Agenda (NUA) by promoting integrated, resilient and inclusive approaches to urban water management as a core component of sustainable urban development.

How? Action 3 – Urban Planning Framework that is intended to support cities in developing a *Water Sensitive City Plan (*an integrated planning tool, aiming to reduce water risks, build resilience, and deliver socio-economic benefits through decentralized water management and nature-based solutions) is aligned with NUA objectives and reflects the shared vision of NUA that well-planned and well-managed urbanisation can drive sustainability, resilience and prosperity.

Regarding the Transformative Commitments, the Action Plan primarily supports Environmentally sustainable and resilient urban development by strengthening climate adaptation, water efficiency, nature-based solutions and ecosystem restoration in cities. It also contributes to Sustainable urban development for social inclusion through actions focused on participatory governance and community engagement, and to Sustainable and inclusive urban prosperity by supporting innovation, investment and digitalisation in water-sensitive infrastructure.

In terms of Effective Implementation, the Action Plan addresses all five NUA pillars. It supports national urban policies and urban legislation and regulations by proposing enabling regulatory frameworks. It contributes to urban planning and design through the development of a Water-Sensitive Urban Planning Framework that integrates water into spatial planning instruments. Actions on innovative financing and investment readiness reinforce local economy and municipal finance, while capacity-building, indicator development and best-practice exchange strengthen local implementation.

The WSC Action Plan can lay the foundations to support a more resilient urbanization, in both developing and developed countries, providing more secure and liveable urban spaces.

### 4.2.2 The Sustainable Developments Goals of the UN

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. Central in the document are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[11]. This Plan contributes directly to the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by supporting the localisation of global sustainability objectives through integrated, place-based urban action.

The most direct contribution is to **SDG 6 – Clean Water and Sanitation**, by promoting integrated and circular water management, improved water efficiency, water quality protection, reuse practices and resilient urban water services.

The Action Plan strongly supports **SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities**, by fostering water-sensitive urban planning, nature-based solutions, climate resilience, inclusive governance and safer, more liveable urban environments.

It also contributes to **SDG 13 – Climate Action**, through actions focused on adaptation to climate-related water risks such as floods, droughts and heatwaves, and by embedding resilience into urban development strategies.

Through the protection and restoration of ecosystems, blue-green infrastructure and biodiversity-friendly urban design, the Action Plan supports **SDG 15 – Life on Land**.

Actions related to governance, capacity-building and stakeholder engagement contribute to **SDG 16 – Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions**, by strengthening transparent, participatory and multi-level decision-making.

Finally, by promoting cooperation between cities, regions, EU institutions, research bodies and international networks, directly supports **SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals**.


[11] Source: 17 SDG Goals: https://sdgs.un.org/goals

### 4.2.3 The Paris Agreement adopted at COP21[12]

The Paris Agreement is a legally binding international treaty on climate change. It was adopted by 196 Parties at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris, France, on 12 December 2015. Its overarching goal is to hold' the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels' and pursue efforts 'to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.'

Since 2020, countries have been submitting their national climate Action plans, known as nationally determined contributions (NDCs). Each successive NDC is meant to reflect an increasingly higher degree of ambition compared to the previous version[13].

The WSC Action Plan supports the objectives of the **Paris Agreement** by strengthening urban climate adaptation and reducing vulnerability to climate-related water risks.

By embedding water sensitivity into sustainable urban development strategies, the Action Plan supports long-term climate-resilient pathways aligned with EU and global climate commitments.

### 4.2.4 The EU Agenda for Cities

Launched in 2025, the EU Agenda for Cities serves as a comprehensive vision and policy framework designed to drive growth, prosperity, and sustainable development across urban areas of all sizes. Recognising that approximately 75% of the EU population lives in cities and urban areas, the Agenda positions these locales as essential partners in tackling Europe's most pressing challenges, including climate change, housing affordability, and social inclusiveness. Since local and regional authorities implement an duse about 70% of EU legislation, the Agenda aims to provide a structured approach to integrate city perspectives into the design and execution of EU policies. By fostering multi-level governance, the EU Agenda for Cities seeks to ensure that urban areas remain thriving, resilient, and inclusive engines of European competitiveness.

To achieve its goals, the Agenda is built upon three primary pillars of action:

- **Continuous dialogue:** Starting in 2026, the Commission will implement **annual high-level political dialogues** and regular technical consultations with urban practitioners. These forums will allow local leaders to identify implementation bottlenecks, suggest policy adjustments, and share best practices directly with EU decision-makers. A **State of European Cities report** will also be published from 2026.

[12] https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf

[13] Source: The Paris Agreement (2015). What is the Paris agreement? https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement

- **Simplification and capacity building:** To help cities navigate the fragmented landscape of EU support, the Agenda introduces streamlined tools. This includes the **EU Cities web-portal** (launched in late 2025) and a **"Cities helpdesk"** to assist authorities in identifying funding and technical assistance. Looking toward the 2028-2034 multiannual financial framework, the Commission proposes the creation of a common **EU Cities Platform.** This platform will consolidate knowledge resources, technical assistance, and data repositories into a single structure, offering support throughout the full lifecycle of urban projects.

- **Targeted investment:** The Agenda will leverage the current and next multiannual financial framework to address urban needs. This includes cohesion policy funds, as well as significant support from the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and the European Investment Bank (EIB).

The EU Agenda for Cities will enhance **coordination and synergies with the Urban Agenda for the EU**, facilitating the implementation of its Actions and building on its outcomes. In May 2025, the Water Sensitive City Partnership has contributed to the Call for Evidence for the EU Agenda for Cities and published a Joint Position Paper[14].

The **Water Sensitive City Thematic Partnership's Joint Position Paper** advocated for the explicit mainstreaming of water-sensitive approaches, shifting the narrative from traditional water management to viewing water as a strategic, cross-cutting theme that can have a transformative impact on urban planning and design, while ensuring intergenerational equity and resilience to climate change. To achieve this, the Partnership emphasized **Better Regulation** by calling for a formalised role for cities of all sizes in EU decision-making and the promotion of multi-level governance that empowers local authorities as primary implementers of water legislation. It further recommended **Better Funding** through simplified, place-based financial mechanisms that reduce administrative complexity for smaller municipalities and ensure policy coherence to close existing compliance gaps. Finally, the paper highlighted the necessity of **Better Knowledge**, urging for long-term technical assistance and dedicated capacity-building to support municipalities in deploying nature-based solutions and water-sensitive planning.

[14] UAEU Water Sensitive City Thematic Partnership. Call for evidence: EU Agenda for Cities. Joint Position Paper, 2025. Link

# 5 MONITORING

| Action | Action Leaders | What is the objective of the Action? | What is the Action category? | Starting Date | Action Implementation Status | Finalisation date | Outputs delivered or under preparation | Outcomes that have been achieved |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Action n°1** | **Municipality of Enschede / Gemeente Enschede (The Netherlands)** | **20% Better Regulation**<br><br>**70-75% Better Knowledge**<br><br>**5-10% Better Funding** | **Data and Indicators** | **01.10.2026** | Planning/inception stage | **30.06.2027** | Brief report on indicator groupings and status by Q4 2026<br><br>Synthesis report on Indicators by Q2 2027 | |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Action n°2** | **Ministry of Climate (Estonia)** | **60% Better Regulation**<br><br>**10% Better Knowledge**<br><br>**30% Better Funding** | **Policy Recommendation** | **01.10.2026** | Planning/inception stage | **31.10.2027** | Synthesis report on regulatory mapping, inconsistencies and compliance framework by Q4 2026<br><br>Policy brief on policy development, alignment and funding by Q4 2027 | |
| **Action n°3** | **Municipality of Turin (Italy)** | **70% Better Regulation**<br><br>**10% Better Knowledge**<br><br>**20% Better Funding** | **Guidance Documents/Handbooks**<br><br>**Strategy/Plan/Roadmap** | **01.10.2026** | Planning/inception stage | **30.11.2027** | Pilot Testing Action of WSCP by Q3 2027<br><br>Roadmap to Water Sensitive City Plan by Q4 2027 | |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Action n°4** | **CEMR - Council of European Municipalities and Regions** | **% Better Regulation**<br><br>**% Better Knowledge**<br><br>**% Better Funding** | **Guidance Documents/Handbooks** | **01.10.2026** | Planning/inception stage | **30.10.2027** | Publication with practical guidance and recommendations for municipalities by Q4 2027 | **Action n°4** |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Action n°5** | **Elche Municipality / Ajuntament d'Elx (Spain)** | **15% Better Regulation**<br><br>**50% Better Knowledge**<br><br>**35% Better Funding** | **Guidance Documents/Handbooks**<br><br>**Strategy/Plan/Roadmap** | **01.10.2026** | Planning/inception stage | **30.11.2027** | Development of implementation guidelines with related technological solutions by Q2 2027<br><br>Pilot Testing \| Assessment of municipalities under the standard & Recommendations by Q4 2027 | **Action n°5** |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Action n°6** | **Acondicionamiento Tarrasense Associación - LEITAT** | **10% Better Regulation**<br><br>**80% Better Knowledge**<br><br>**10% Better Funding** | **Guidance Documents/Handbooks** | **01.10.2026** | Planning/inception stage | **30.11.2027** | Good Practices Compendium by Q2 2027<br><br>Capacity Building Modules by Q4 2027 | |
| **Action n°7** | **Municipality of Enschede / Gemeente Enschede (The Netherlands)** | **15% Better Regulation**<br><br>**75% Better Knowledge**<br><br>**10% Better Funding** | **Guidance Documents/Handbooks**<br><br>**Strategy/Plan/Roadmap** | **01.10.2026** | Planning/inception stage | **30.11.2027** | Framework for Challenge (includes Toolkit) by Q4 2026<br><br>Pilot Implementation and Evaluation by Q3 2027 | |

# 6 EUI OPPORTUNITIES

As the Permanent Secretary for the Urban Agenda for the EU, EUI has developed and is implementing a Support Service Package[15] aimed to make the participation of all UAEU members easier, more effective and efficient. Since autumn 2022, this also includes informing and supporting them in making use of the other EUI opportunities.

Below is a list of the available EUI opportunities which have been presented, discussed and are considered to be used during the Action Plan implementation. Between these the City-to-City exchange and the Peer Review are considered an great complementary method for the implementation phase.

## 6.1 Capacity Building

Through capacity building, EUI aims to **enhance and strengthen cities' abilities** to develop **Sustainable Urban Development** policies, strategies, and practices in a collaborative and inclusive manner. Our capacity building approach is nurtured by the wish to create links and knowledge sharing among cities around the EU.

### 6.1.1 City-to-City Exchanges

City-to-City Exchanges[16] are **in-person visits or online exchanges** carried out between an applicant city and a one or two peer cities. Peer cities share new working methods and innovative approaches on specific implementation challenges identified by the applicant city. The challenges relate to the design and implementation of Sustainable Urban Development strategies.

Applications may be submitted by **urban authorities of any size from EU Member States**. Other stakeholders may participate in the exchange if justified by the urban authority.

You can apply for a City-to-City Exchange at any moment, **the call is continuously open**. In general, you can count on starting the actual visits three months after submitting an application.

[15] https://www.urbanagenda.urban-initiative.eu/urban-agenda-eu

[16] For more and updated information visit the dedicated EUI webpage: https://www.urban-initiative.eu/capacity-building/pilot-call-c2c-exchanges

### 6.1.2 Peer Reviews

**Peer Reviews**[17] take the form of workshops in which cities are peer reviewed by other cities and relevant stakeholders in order to benchmark their Sustainable Urban Development strategies. There are two possible roles in the process**: City under Review and Peer Reviewer.**

**Cities under Review** benefit directly by getting targeted advice on improving their design and implementation of Sustainable Urban Development strategies and practices in an integrated and participative way.

**Peer Reviewers** benefit equally from this process as they are bringing forward their good practices and get new ideas from all the cities that are brought together by the Peer Review.

Applications may be submitted by urban authorities of any size from EU Member States that are involved in the design and implementation of a Sustainable Urban Development Strategy (in line with Article 11 of the ERDF Regulation).

## 6.2 Innovative Actions Calls for Proposals

The Innovative Actions Calls for Proposals provide opportunities for cities, as enablers of innovation, to take the risk and turn ambitious and creative ideas into pilot projects that can be tested in real urban settings. Previous UIA / EUI-IA funded projects linked to the topic of water will be considered during the implementation phase.

The Fourth Call for Innovative Actions was launched in February 2026, aiming to support transformative solutions that tackle urgent urban challenges in cities above 25.000 inhabitants. The call is aligned with the EU Agenda for Cities and is structured on 6 topics: Topic 1: Competitiveness, digitalisation, innovation and investment; Topic 2: Social inclusion and equality; Topic 3: Security, safety and preparedness; Topic 4: Affordable, sustainable, decent-quality and inclusive housing and buildings; Topic 5: Climate action, environment and clean energy; Topic 6: Mobility. WSC Partnership members were invited to follow the Call updates and consider the opportunity to apply.

[17] For more and updated information visit the dedicated EUI webpage: https://www.urban-initiative.eu/capacity-building/pilot-call-c2c-exchanges

# 7 ANNEX REFERENCES

To be added in final version of Action Plan.