



URBAN AGENDA FOR THE EU

Call for evidence: EU Agenda for Cities

Joint Position Paper

Water Sensitive City



May 2025



Summary

All cities in the EU are faced with increasing water-related challenges. Europe's water is under significant pressure, resulting in risks related to efficiency, scarcity, pollution and water events, such as flooding and droughts. Our Partnership, launched in November 2024, signals a shift from a traditional focus on water supply and sewage management to a more integrated, forward-looking approach to water-sensitive urban development.

The UAEU Water Sensitive City Thematic Partnership (WSC TP) shifts the perspective from seeing water as a problem to seeing it as a resource and a cross-cutting theme, which can have a transformative impact on urban planning and design, while ensuring inter-generational equality and resilience to climate change. Moreover, the WSC concept goes beyond water supply and sewage management, connecting multiple sectors, in particular climate adaptation and mitigation, green and blue infrastructure, biodiversity, land use, agriculture, economy and competitiveness, health, social equity, and cultural heritage.

In this context, the WSC TP submits a *Joint Position Paper* (attached) to support the mainstreaming of water-sensitive approaches in the EU Agenda for Cities. A summary of the key points is offered below:

1. Better regulation:

- Water should be clearly identified as a cross-cutting, priority theme in the future EU Agenda for Cities. Given that the European Commission recognises water as a strategic and cross-sectoral priority (in particular, through the upcoming *Water Resilience Strategy*), the UAEU Water Sensitive City (WSC) Thematic Partnership calls for the explicit representation of water in the new EU Agenda for Cities.
- Building on the UAEU framework, cities of all sizes (including medium and small cities) should have a formal role in EU decision making. The future Agenda for Cities should strengthen multi-level governance by recognising the role of cities as key implementors of EU legislation, which is essential in the field of water.
- The Agenda should also reinforce the EU's commitment to subsidiarity by empowering local authorities to act, regardless of national-level limitations, and support place-based policies that reflect local and regional needs.
- As water challenges cross municipal and administrative boundaries, the Agenda should also promote urban-rural linkages and inter-jurisdictional cooperation for municipalities of all sizes.



2. Better funding:

- The WSC Partnership calls for place-based, accessible funding that reflects local needs, especially for smaller municipalities, with simplified procedures and reduced administrative work, lower co-financing, and dedicated resources for both planning and infrastructure.
- To avoid fragmentation across over EU initiatives and facilitate access to funding, the new Agenda for Cities should ensure policy and funding coherence. A mission-oriented approach for water sensitive cities is also proposed, considering the large compliance gap with EU Directives (WFD, UWWWD).

3. Better knowledge:

- Municipalities require technical assistance and long-term capacity building to implement strategies and transformative projects, enabling them to also advance water resilience.
- As the main implementers of legislation, cities also require support, with the Report on *the European Water Resilience Strategy* underlining ‘the need to provide targeted financial and technical assistance to municipalities to facilitate compliance with water-related legislation’.
- To mainstream water sensitive planning and design and increase awareness, municipalities also require dedicated training.

With these measures, the future EU Agenda for Cities can empower municipalities and urban areas to make water sensitive city design the new standard for urban water management, within a broader approach to sustainability and climate resilience.

About the WSC Partnership: <https://www.urbanagenda.urban-initiative.eu/partnerships/water-sensitive-city>



Water Sensitive City Thematic Partnership

Joint Position Paper on the EU Agenda for Cities

Introduction

Cities of all sizes in the EU face increasing water-related challenges. The urgency of addressing these challenges is underscored by recent findings, presented also in the Report on the Water Resilience Strategy presented by MEP Thomas Bajada¹. According to European Environment Agency report 07/204, Europe's water is under significant pressure, resulting in risks related to efficiency, scarcity, pollution and water events, such as flooding and droughts.

With 75% of Europe's population living in urban areas, and cities and subnational governments currently implementing 70% of EU legislation, having a formal role in decision-making can accelerate the transition to water resilience across the EU.

The importance of involving cities in shaping EU policies has gained increasing recognition, leading to the establishment of the 'Urban Agenda for the EU' through the 'Pact of Amsterdam' in June 2016. While cities still have limited formal rights in EU-level decision-making, the Urban Agenda for the EU (UAEU) provides a valuable framework for multi-level governance, enabling local and regional governments to influence EU policymaking.

In order to realise the full potential of the European Union and deliver on its strategic objectives, the Urban Agenda for the EU strives to involve

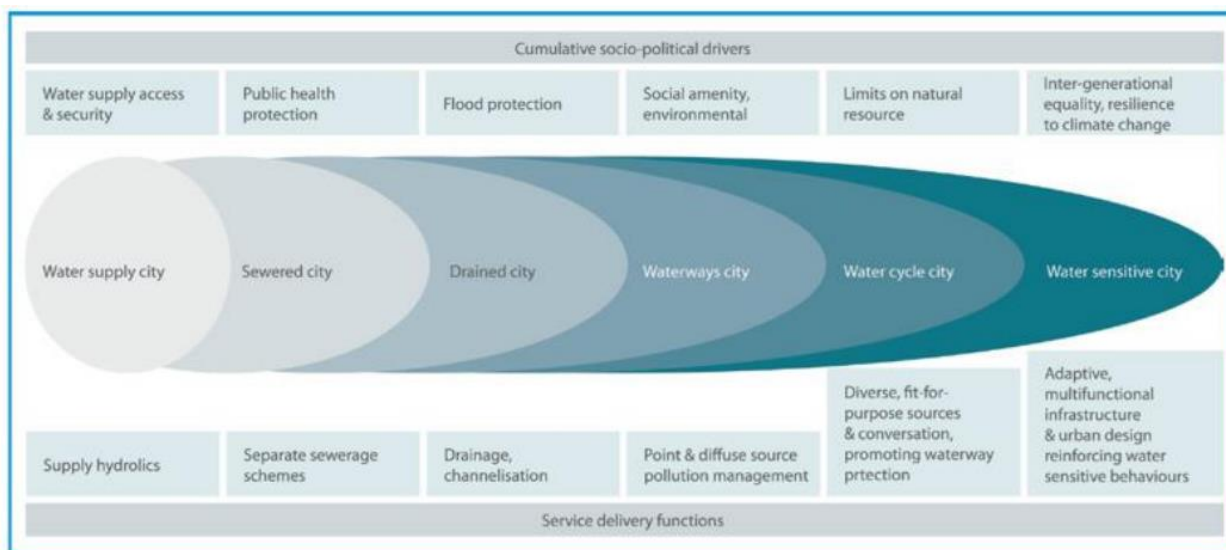
¹ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0073_EN.pdf



cities in achieving Better Regulation, Better Funding and Better Knowledge. (Pact of Amsterdam)

In this context, the Water Sensitive City (WSC) Partnership submits this joint position paper to support the mainstreaming of water-sensitive approaches in the new Agenda for Cities.

Launched in November 2024, the WSC TP signals a shift in narrative - from a traditional focus on water supply and sewage management to a more integrated, forward-looking approach to water-sensitive urban development. As highlighted in the Ex-Ante Assessment of the Partnership (2024), the WSC concept **shifts the perspective from seeing water as a problem to rather seeing it as a resource**, which can have a transformative impact on urban planning and design, while ensuring inter-generational equality and resilience to climate change. This holistic approach aims to make water sensitive design the new standard for urban water management.



What is our vision for Water-Sensitive cities in 2050 ?

By 2050, all territories - cities, peri-urban and rural areas - must be fully water sensitive—resilient, inclusive, and climate-ready. Urban areas will manage water as a shared, valuable resource through nature-based and circular solutions that mitigate floods, droughts, and pollution. Water-sensitive design will be embedded in housing, infrastructure, and public space planning, promoting equity, health, and biodiversity.



Digital tools and real-time data will enable efficient, adaptive water systems. Strong multi-level governance will ensure cities co-shape and implement water policy. EU funding, regulation, and innovation must align to mainstream these approaches. A Water Sensitive City is not only greener but smarter, fairer, and better prepared for the future.

Better Regulation: strengthen multi-level governance, multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral approaches

The WSC Partnership of the Urban Agenda for the EU embodies the three major principles guiding the EU regulatory framework: multi-sectoral approach (holistic approach to water in urban contexts), **multi-level governance** (the partners represent the local, regional, national and EU levels) and **multi-stakeholder approach** (the partnership includes public institutions, research institutions, technological centres and social cooperatives). In this sense, the framework of the Urban Agenda for the EU offers valuable evidence of the positive impact of implementing multi-sectoral, multi-level, and multi-stakeholder approaches (see *Urban Agenda for the EU Multi-level governance in action: 2021 Update*²).

Building on the UAEU framework, cities of all sizes (including medium and small cities) should have a formal role in EU decision making. The future EU Agenda for Cities should strengthen multi-level governance by recognising the role of cities as key implementors of EU legislation, and formalising the participation of cities and regions in EU decision-making. This could take the form of a dedicated Directorate for Cities within DG REGIO and cross-DG urban teams to ensure coherent EU-level support.

The future EU Agenda for Cities should also strive to mainstream multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder collaboration. Considering the large investment and capacity gap, this would enable cities to leverage knowledge, capacity and resources from a wider pool, and support a whole-of-society approach to climate resilience, including water sensitive design.

Water should be clearly identified as a cross-cutting, priority theme in the future EU Agenda for Cities and integrated into urban planning, with a stronger emphasis in Integrated Urban Development Strategies (IUDS). The topic of water is connected with a multitude of

² https://www.urbanagenda.urban-initiative.eu/sites/default/files/2024-02/Brochure_urban_agenda_eu_2021update_en.pdf



other sectors, including climate change adaptation, nature and biodiversity, land use, industry and economic development, circular economy, agriculture and food production, tourism and recreation, transport, energy and climate change mitigation, as well as health, social equity and cultural heritage³.

Recognising this interplay, water should be integrated into a broader concept of sustainability that encompasses environmental, social, and economic dimensions, and ensure that water-related policies also benefit the most vulnerable. This holistic approach is aligned with the New European Bauhaus (NEB) values (beautiful, sustainable, together) and working principles (participatory process, multi-level engagement, trans-disciplinary approach), offering a valuable opportunity for demonstration and promotion of successful projects.

Water should also be integrated into broader climate adaptation and circular economy policies. Climate adaptation measures should:

- prioritise the rational and efficient use of local water resources (*water efficiency first* principle)
- encourage the uptake of recycled (second-use) water in urban and peri-urban areas vulnerable to drought and water scarcity
- support the development of green infrastructure and nature-based solutions that enhance water retention, reduce heat stress, and improve urban quality of life, creating co-benefits for public health
- promote Water-Sensitive Design (WSD) to reduce energy demand (for example, by avoiding the unnecessary treatment of rainwater that no longer enters the sewage system; green roofs and permeable surfaces, can also lower the need for cooling energy and mitigate the urban heat island effect).

Moreover, water-related issues transcend municipal and political boundaries, with smaller municipalities often lacking the resources or political mandate to respond effectively. Therefore, the new EU Agenda for Cities should promote urban-rural linkages and facilitate cross-boundary, inter-jurisdictional collaboration, but also collaboration

³ https://www.urbanagenda.urban-initiative.eu/sites/default/files/2024-06/EAA_Water%20Sensitive%20City_FINAL_DGUM.pdf



between cities of different sizes. Place-based policies should be supported to reflect real needs at the local and regional level.

Finally, the Agenda must ensure that local authorities can continue implementing EU priorities on the ground, even when national governments are unable or unwilling to meet the Commission's planning requirements. EU support must remain accessible to cities and territories, independently of national-level bottlenecks or political obstacles.

Better Funding: a simplified, place-based approach

In terms of funding, the WSC Partnership has identified several key recommendations, rooted in the place-based approach and recognising the capacity gap of smaller municipalities.

Firstly, funding needs to reflect local realities, not only national strategies. Smaller funding calls that require less consortium partners could be introduced, and application processes should be simplified, with reduced co-financing requirements. Future EU budgets should earmark funds specifically for local governments, while making it mandatory to involve them directly in the preparation and implementation of national funding strategies. Funding could be linked to multi-level, multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral water plans and should cover both soft measures (planning and coordination, research and innovation, awareness) and hard infrastructure investments.

The European Union offers a variety of programmes and funds supporting local and regional government, making EU funds and programmes increasingly difficult to navigate for local and regional governments. In this regard, the new policy agenda should present an overview of the different funding opportunities available to subnational government. Moreover, the policy agenda for cities is the opportunity to clarify the EU support offer for cities and urban development, which would allow to identify potential overlaps and existing gap, ensuring better complementarity and coherence in view of the next long-term budget for the EU. It also needs to address the current challenges hindering the funding access at local and regional level, such as mismatching access and reporting rules, co-funding rates and administrative complexity.

Better knowledge and implementation

Municipalities require hands-on technical assistance to identify, access funding, implement strategies and legislation. Small- and medium-sized municipalities lack the



technical capacity to navigate the complex landscape EU programmes, and effectively implement strategies. Therefore, they require support to ensure a dedicated human resources at the city level, or through a centralised approach. As the main implementers of legislation, cities also require support with ensuring compliance, as highlighted in the recently approved European Parliament initiative report on *the European Water Resilience Strategy*⁴, which underlines ‘the need to provide targeted financial and technical assistance to municipalities to facilitate compliance with water-related legislation’.

As the new EU Agenda for Cities seeks to organise and streamline existing EU support for cities and other urban areas, there is an opportunity to redirect resources toward medium- and long-term (e.g. 3 years) technical assistance programmes for municipalities. This could be achieved by establishing local or regional Urban Contact Points, that would also enable matching local needs with relevant expertise. The assistance should go beyond sharing information and support with strategic planning and policy development, to offer hands-on support in implementation and day-to-day operations.

Coupled with technical assistance, cities would benefit from long-term capacity-building programmes for strategy implementation, as well as regular implementation dialogue. A potential avenue to explore is to develop a network of experts to support with capacity building over a longer term (replacing current short-term programmes of 1-3 months), who can also facilitate two-way communication between municipalities and the European Commission. Moreover, a unified, accessible EU capacity-building framework would be needed, as to many small and medium sized cities it is hard to have a comprehensive overview of the capacity building landscape.

To mainstream water sensitive planning and design and increase awareness, municipalities also require dedicated training. To increase knowledge and implementation of water sensitive urban approaches, dedicated trainings for municipalities could be linked to platforms like the EIT-KIC for Water and other flagship initiatives, such as the Adaptation to Climate Change Mission, Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities Mission, and Restore our Ocean and Waters Mission.

The EU Missions, particularly on Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities and Adaptation to Climate Change should include a strong water resilience dimension, positioning cities and territories at the forefront of the green transition. However, their action and the

⁴ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0073_EN.pdf



potential transfer of knowledge from Mission cities to other territories should be better integrated in the existing framework, ensuring synergies with other initiatives, accessible funding and capacity-building support.

The Water Sensitive City Partnership also supports a mission-oriented approach, in the sense promoted by economist Prof. Mariana Mazzucato. It is worth exploring how this approach could be applied to support cities in achieving water-related targets, considering that there is a clear need to accelerate action to reduce the compliance gap with EU Directives⁵.

Conclusion and Call to Action

Given that the European Commission recognises water as a strategic, urgent and cross-sectoral challenge (in particular, through the upcoming Water Resilience Strategy), the WSC Partnership calls for the explicit representation of water in the new Agenda for Cities.

The Urban Agenda for the EU provides an effective framework for strengthening multi-level governance, multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral approaches. Building on the UAEU framework, cities of all sizes (including medium and small cities) should have a formal role in EU decision making. Access to funding for municipalities of all sizes should be simplified to support local action, and interjurisdictional collaboration should be strengthened.

The Agenda should also reinforce the EU's commitment to subsidiarity by empowering local authorities to act, regardless of national-level limitations, and ensure that place-based, context-sensitive policies remain at the heart of sustainable urban development. Moreover, municipalities require technical assistance and long-term capacity building to implement strategies and transformative projects, enabling them to also advance water resilience.

With these measures, the future EU Agenda for Cities can empower municipalities and urban areas to make water sensitive city design the new standard for urban water management, within a broader approach to sustainability and climate resilience.

⁵ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0073_EN.pdf



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