

# Water Wise Societies Impact Innovation Report 2024–2025

Lessons learned and experiences on the path  
towards Sustainable Water for All 2050

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Lessons learned and experiences on the path towards Sustainable Water for All 2050

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## Preface

We are on our way! Following the first two years of the Water Wise Societies, I feel a sense of pride, and of gratitude. We have now launched Sweden's largest ever investment in research and innovation in the water sector. Together, we have laid the foundations for something that is already making a difference – growing engagement, new collaborations and a deeper understanding of what is needed to create sustainable water for all. We have made an excellent start, driven by the considerable interest and willingness to change demonstrated by stakeholders throughout the system.

That said, I approach the task with humility. Our mission is broad, our tasks are demanding, and there is still a lot to learn and a lot to do. We have long-term work ahead of us in which we need to work together to deepen our collaborations, identify and implement innovative solutions that can transform systems, refine our ways of working and continue to build capacity across the water sector.

I am looking forward to the next step – and to moving forward together with you.

*Magnus Arnell, Programme Director*

## Abstract

The first Impact Innovation Report from Water Wise Societies summarises the key lessons and experiences from launch up to December 2025. This report is based on interviews with the programme management team, members of the finance and policy council and a selection of stakeholders from among the programme's members and project leaders. It is also founded on a portfolio analysis of the programme's first twenty projects, as well as results from evaluations and analyses of programme activities and initiatives.

The programme's far-reaching mission – Sustainable Water for All 2050 – is its strength, and yet also provides a challenge. The direction of the transition has been developed together with stakeholders and involves a wide range of organisations throughout across the water system, from source to shore. The programme has strengthened existing research and innovation ecosystems while also contributing to the emergence of new collaborations. The programme's activities and initiatives have resulted in the creation of new networks, and stakeholders that had not worked together previously have developed projects together. The new types of calls for proposals and the approach structured around five system dimensions have also broadened perspectives within the projects and enhanced stakeholders' ability to drive the transition in line with the mission.

Going forward, the programme will need to work actively to maintain broad engagement and to mobilise more stakeholders, by both engaging new groups and making the programme more accessible to stakeholders who are already involved. Based on an ongoing analysis of the programme's portfolio, activities and calls for proposals will continue to evolve to create scope for movement towards the fulfilment of the mission, while also achieving the programme's goals and completing its tasks.

The programme in figures

# 10 tasks

Three goals and ten tasks define the direction towards the mission.

# 80 members

are driving the direction and initiatives, and learning together about the transition.

# 52 projects

across all ten tasks and five system dimensions.

# 202 participants

have taken part in the programme's transition arena on one or more occasions.

# 55 % women

among all the people who have been part of the programme office, steering committee and advisory groups, or manage projects funded by the programme.



system boundary are deliberate choices, as a systems perspective on catchment areas and broad, deep engagement among stakeholders and needs owners within the system are a fundamental prerequisite for fulfilment of the mission.



Figure 2. The Water Wise Societies mission, three goals and ten tasks in total.

That is why goals and tasks have been developed and specified in close communication with programme members. The objective has been to formulate goals and tasks that mobilise and engage stakeholders and create a common direction for the transition.

## 1.1 The theory of change guides and focuses efforts towards the mission

Interviews with the programme office, members and project participants show that the theory of change has helped to broaden the programme office's view of innovation and how to work with and understand various dimensions of societal transformation. Stakeholders within the system who have committed to the transition by applying for and leading projects under the programme's calls for proposals have also adopted the principles of the theory of change – such as the five system dimensions – and the focus of the mission on water from source to shore.

The programme's theory of change comprises three main elements: (i) the direction towards the mission, (ii) transformation of entire systems, and (iii) transformation driven by stakeholders (Figure 3). The theory of change also includes an impact logic, which sets out how the results and outcomes of activities and initiatives lead to impacts effects towards the fulfilment of the mission.

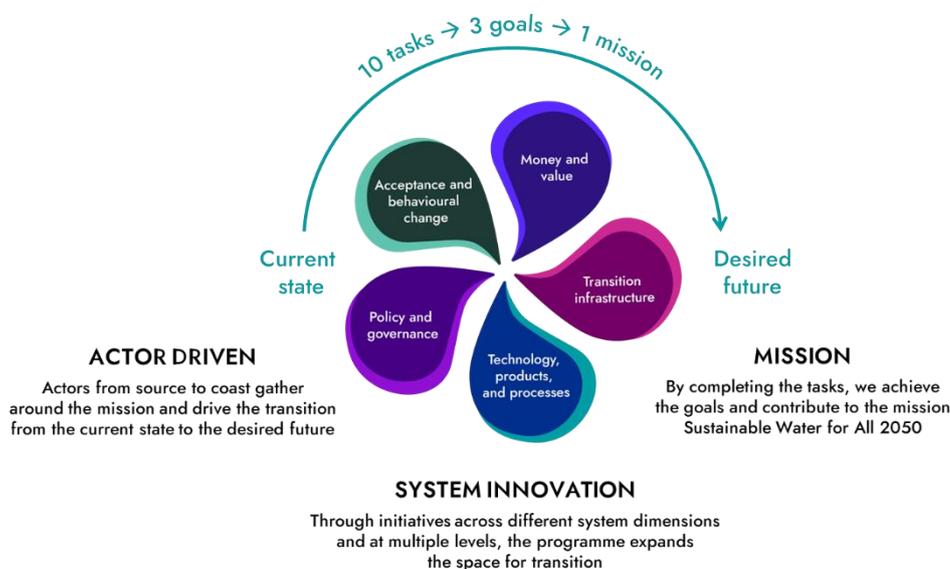
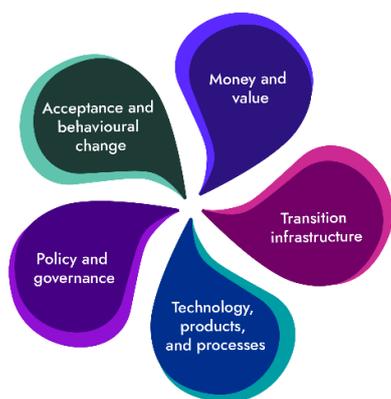


Figure 3. Illustration of the Water Wise Societies theory of change.

The challenges identified in the ten tasks are root causes and cut across many elements of our socio-technical systems. They take a long time to develop and take root, which means that resolving them is also a complex and time-consuming task. Water Wise Societies works based on a research-based model [1], with five system dimensions in which the right conditions need to be in place for a transition to be possible (Figure 4).



- Technology, products and processes** – Changes to equipment required for the transition, such as new technological solutions, infrastructure, data and digital systems.
- Money and value** – Changes to aspects that may be regarded as adding value, such as funding, business models, value models, value networks and budgets.
- Policy and governance** – Changes to aspects that steer and define boundaries, such as laws, regulations, frameworks, standards, guidance, roadmaps and strategies.
- Acceptance and behavioural change** – Aspects that lead to changes in behaviour or new ways of acting and thinking, such as acceptance of necessary new solutions and behavioural changes that support the transition.
- Transition infrastructure** – Changes to the space and criteria enabling stakeholders to take action and transition, such as processes and platforms for collaboration, competence- and capacitybuilding, digitalisation and strategic organisation and leadership.

Figure 4. System innovation model. Adapted for Water Wise Societies based on research on how the new solutions can be implemented and scaled at multiple levels – from local to global.

Research and innovation can contribute to the transition by developing and implementing innovative solutions for the tasks within all five system dimensions. Relevant stakeholders need to be engaged throughout the entire system, from source to shore, if we are to achieve systemic transformation. Stakeholders need to develop understanding, capacity and

capability for both the process and the solutions. They need to be mobilised and engaged, identifying barriers to develop, trial and demonstrate solutions that contribute to change across the five system dimensions. The programme contributes to this by establishing a common direction for the transition, mobilising and engaging stakeholders, developing, coordinating and funding initiatives, and working actively with evaluation and learning.

## 1.2 Programme office, members and advisory groups

The programme office is arranged into work packages under a steering committee elected by members at an annual meeting, and a programme council where strategic members are represented, thereby giving stakeholders influence within the programme. To ensure broad perspectives and accommodate key stakeholders, the programme has three advisory groups in the areas of policy, finance and research, as well as an international reference group. The transition arena also allows programme members to influence the direction and design of the programme. The organisation is illustrated in Figure 5.



Figure 5. Organisation of the programme.

Moreover, the programme office is actively engaged in mapping and mobilising other stakeholders within the system. This is described in section 2.1.1. Water Wise Societies is being developed and run in close collaboration with system stakeholders, as they are the people who will be implementing the transition towards the mission by contributing initiatives and projects.

The programme office is coordinated and led by RISE and is run together with IVL Swedish Environmental Research Institute, the Stockholm Environment Institute, the Swedish Water & Wastewater Association, Linköping Science Park and Lund University. A total of more than twenty people work at the programme office. Most of them split their time between

the programme office and other tasks within their home organisations, thereby helping to maintain close contact between the programme office and the rest of the water sector.

The programme office is led by Programme Director Magnus Arnell, Deputy Programme Director Anna Maria Sundin and Programme Coordinator Elin Flodin. The website for the programme presents the programme management team, including the seven work package leaders<sup>2</sup>. One objective when staffing and resourcing the programme office has been to involve the expertise needed for the goals and methods on which the programme is based. This includes various parts of the water domain, as well as fields such as research, innovation, transition management and policy. All in all, the programme office possesses broad expertise for mission-oriented work. Gender equality and inclusion are important considerations in the composition of the programme office: this is elaborated further below.

The various elements of the programme organisation have been established gradually. The members and the transition arena were launched back in April 2024, the steering committee and programme council came into being in the first six months of the programme, and the other four councils joined them in the second half of 2025. The programme office's organisation and processes are documented in an organisational manual to ensure efficiency, transparency and continuity planning. The programme office is constantly evaluating its work and adapting its organisation and working methods as necessary.

System stakeholders need to demonstrate a high level of trust in the programme office; and this trust is an important prerequisite for the success of the programme. Achieving and maintaining this requires integrity, transparency and impartiality in programme office work, as well as an equitable and inclusive approach. This is maintained by aspects such as division of responsibilities between the roles of the programme office and the funding authorities. The programme office is responsible for the direction towards the mission (goals and tasks) and the purpose and focus of programme activities and initiatives (such as calls for proposals). The funding authorities are responsible for the texts of calls for proposals and evaluation and decision-making regarding applications; that is, the allocation of funding. This division of responsibilities is important as a way of preventing conflicts of interest among stakeholders and members of the programme office. The programme office's efforts to prevent conflicts of interest are set out in the

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<sup>2</sup> Find out more about the work package leaders within the programme office on the website for the programme: <https://waterwisesocieties.se/kontakt/>

organisational manual and documented in connection with each call for proposals. The division of responsibilities between the programme office and the funding authorities is also an important way of ensuring a needs-driven approach to initiatives, contributed by the programme office in particular. Several participants at the programme office bore heavy workloads during the initial phase of the programme. Now that procedures and all parts of the organisation are in place, the ambition is for the programme to make the switch from start-up to more regular operations with recurring processes and activities.

## **1.2.1 Finance council, policy council, research council and International Advisory Board**

The programme has established strategic advisory groups in the fields of finance, policy and research, as well as an international reference group.

The policy council is an advisory body that provides strategic input and acts as a reference group for the programme and its projects on issues relating to policy, legislation and its implementation, frameworks, standards and strategies. Policy council participants represent stakeholders at government agencies with significant responsibility and influence on the water sector and the Water Wise Societies mission. The following public authorities are represented on the council: The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, the Geological Survey of Sweden, the Swedish Meteorological and Hydrological Institute, the Swedish Civil Defence and Resilience Agency, the Swedish Food Agency, the Swedish Board of Agriculture, the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning, and the South Baltic Water Authority.

The finance council's participants represent stakeholders in the categories of banking and finance, insurance companies and municipalities. The following stakeholders are represented on the finance council: Kommuninvest, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, Danske Bank, Länsförsäkringar, Swedbank, Skandinaviska Enskilda Banken, Folksam/KPA pension, Fund Forward, Kalmar vatten, the municipality of Vellinge and the municipality of Östersund. The primary task of the finance council is to provide strategic input for the programme and act as a reference group. Members are expected to contribute knowledge and experience on financial aspects that are important for various stakeholders to consider in order to fulfil the programme's mission.

The research council is an advisory body that provides strategic input and acts as a reference group for the programme in respect of issues related to research, universities and colleges. The research council is made up of

representatives from six Swedish higher education institutions that were selected based on individual qualifications. The research council includes representatives from Örebro University, Lund University, Uppsala University, Chalmers University of Technology, the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Luleå University of Technology and Svenskt Vatten. Together, these representatives also represent graduate schools and other major programmes, clusters and centres within the water sector in Sweden.

The International Advisory Board is made up of four international experts selected to provide the programme with strategic advice and input on international experiences and contacts, as well as best practices in working with mission-driven innovation and transformation in the water sector. The International Advisory Board includes Kalanithy Vairavamoorthy ED IWA, UK; William Sarni, Practice Lead Earth Finance, US; Trine Stausgaard Munk, Sustainability Director Ramboll, DK; and Tony Wong, Professor Monash University, AU.

### **1.3 Gender equality, equal opportunities and inclusion are critical to success**

The ability to include people's differences, experiences and perspectives is a fundamental prerequisite for the programme's success in achieving its goals and completing its tasks. Gender equality, equal opportunities and inclusion must permeate both what is done and how it is done. In total, the programme includes 70 people with roles in the programme office, the steering committee, and the advisory groups, with an equal distribution between women (35) and men (35). At the physical meetings in the transition arena, slightly more women (179) than men (150) have participated, but the distribution has been relatively even. This provides a robust foundation for equitable influence in the programme's key decision-making and collaborative arenas. Among approved projects, slightly more women (32) than men (20) serve as project managers. This is illustrated in Figure 6 and elaborated in section 2.3.



Figure 6. Number and proportion of women and men by programme management/decisions and initiatives. The number of women and men leading projects are shown for initiatives.

## 2 Programme activities

The programme is founded on the water research and development ecosystem that has already been established. This ecosystem has been reinforced in the first year of the programme through the establishment of new meeting places and networks, with the programme office quickly building up a supportive and positive culture that creates space for transition.

### 2.1 Programme office work creates space for change

The programme office has an important part to play in creating space for change towards the mission. This includes broad efforts to work with system stakeholders to define the direction for the transition from the current situation to a desired future, to mobilise system stakeholders in order to make the transition, to develop and fund system innovation activities and initiatives, to coordinate activities and projects, and to evaluate the programme and go on developing it.

#### 2.1.1 Stakeholders are essential for the transition

Key stakeholders are mobilised through the Water Wise Societies member organisation. Members help to define the direction of the mission by formulating goals and tasks and identifying the initiatives required to achieve them. Together with its members, the programme office reflects, learns and develops its work around the tasks and the overall transition. The annual

meeting also provides an opportunity for members to elect the programme's steering committee, which makes decisions on the long-term direction of Water Wise Societies and continuously monitors the programme's progress towards its mission.

Eighty stakeholders had signed up for membership by the end of 2025. Of these, 55 were already involved back in 2023, when the programme application was being developed. Thanks to this, the programme had a broad group of committed stakeholders from the outset, including water utilities and municipalities, regions, universities, institutes, businesses, agencies, community engagement, water protection associations and non-profit organisations. During the first two years of the programme, there have been active and structured efforts to identify gaps in the membership base and engage new members. Figure 7 provides an overview of the membership base at the end of 2025.

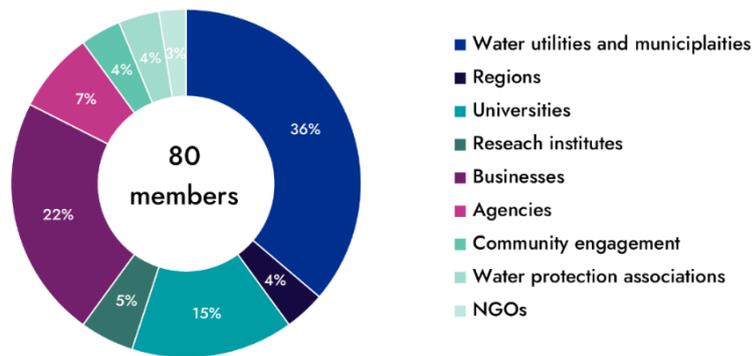


Figure 7. Number of members by stakeholder category.

Key stakeholders who have supplemented the previous membership base are the Swedish Civil Defence and Resilience Agency (formerly the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency), the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, the Stockholm County Administrative Board, Region Halland, TetraPak, Lantmännen, the Federation of Swedish Farmers, the World Wide Fund for Nature, technology providers, water conservation associations, a number of universities and colleges, as well as municipalities and water and wastewater organisations.

Many members bear witness to the fact that the programme's activities and initiatives have revitalised research and innovation efforts, created new networks of stakeholders and opened funding for fields of knowledge that were previously underfunded. One example is the call for proposals focusing on acceptance and behaviour change.

Programme members are important to its direction and design, but they are not alone in working towards the mission. More stakeholders in the system from source to shore – in the forestry and mining industries, for example – need to be engaged at various levels to drive the transition. Besides its membership organisation, Water Wise Societies engages stakeholders in many other ways.

A structured survey of stakeholders took place in 2025, which began with identifying the sectors that need to be engaged to achieve the programme's mission and goals. The sectors identified are public authorities, the municipal sector, the business community, the academic community and civil society.

The stakeholder survey initially covered members, participants in programme councils and funded projects; and this information is updated on a regular basis. It also provides examples of potentially relevant stakeholders to support gap analysis and mobilisation. The survey is gradually being developed in consultation with the programme management team. In connection with the review of goals and tasks, work has begun on identifying the key stakeholders for the implementation of the programme. Together with the analysis of the funded project portfolio, this will be important in prioritising stakeholder groups and categories to mobilise based on the gap analysis.

Besides attending conferences and meetings and maintaining the usual communication via the website, email and social media, the programme office has made active efforts to invite, inform and guide stakeholders. The programme office has held in-person and online meetings for information, questions and answers, as well as matchmaking in various ways for all calls for proposals. Furthermore, applicants have been offered individual guidance sessions in order to help stakeholders understand the purpose of the calls for proposals and how the projects are intended to contribute to change, as well as helping them to formulate applications that are capable of contributing as effectively as possible to the purpose of the calls for proposals. Overall, the outcome in terms of the number of applications and the assessed quality of these applications indicates that these mobilisation and guidance efforts were successful.

## **2.1.2 The transition arena – space for shared learning, impact and co-creation**

The transition arena is at the heart of the programme and aims to engage stakeholders who are members of the programme in order to: (i) shape the direction of the programme (goals and tasks), (ii) develop how the transition can be implemented (activities and initiatives), and (iii) learn together about

the mission and solutions and build capacity for the transition. The arena includes a series of online and in-person meetings, seminars and workshops to facilitate collaboration, co-creation and learning in pursuit of the three purposes. Members are also given the opportunity to provide input and contribute by reviewing materials.

The emphasis in the first twelve months was on involvement, discussion and learning about the programme's mission and ways of working. Over time, thematic inputs linked to the mission and outcomes of projects have become more prominent. Meetings and webinars have addressed subject-oriented themes (such as Coordination of measures, Creative ways of influencing acceptance and behavioural change, and Three perspectives on the new EU water resilience strategy), learning about mission-oriented efforts to system change (such as Systems innovation and transition and From transition arena to initiatives), as well as more direct input for the programme in respect of goals and tasks, for example.

Up to December 2025, four major in-person meetings and twelve online breakfast seminars have been held<sup>3</sup>. These breakfast seminars have attracted between 50 and 90 participants and increasing numbers of people are attending the in-person meetings, from around 70 to 100, as the number of members has grown. At the in-person meetings (where participants register, which makes it possible to collect statistics), there is broad representation across the various categories of member organisations, with some variation between meetings, possibly depending on the theme of the meeting. Municipalities and municipal water and wastewater organisations are the sector providing the highest number of participants, which also reflects the membership base; but other businesses and companies have participated to almost the same extent, as have the academic community and institutes. Public authorities and other participants account for a smaller share. The work of the transition arena has been evaluated after each major in-person meeting, and during the member interviews for this report. The transition arena is described by several members as a new and vital forum for creating new networks and new forms of collaboration – an important first step in fulfilment of the mission.

### **2.1.3 Space for research and innovation**

The programme office has set up a matchmaking arena known as the Innovation Workshop to support the development of innovations in the

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<sup>3</sup> Find out more about all previous events involving the transition arena at <https://waterwisesocieties.se/tidigare-event/>

water sector in both municipal and industrial contexts. The aim of this is to bridge the gap between needs owners, innovative companies and established stakeholders in industry, government and the academic community, and to accelerate the development of solutions that strengthen a sustainable water system. Challenges have been identified based on the work of the programme office on the tasks, but also by means of interviews with all members in 2025. Two rounds of the Innovation Workshop have taken place, focusing on wastewater treatment plants and the mining and metals industry. This work is set to continue in 2026 and is linked to funding opportunities for small projects that could pave the way for larger initiatives and pilot trials. One example is the call for proposals titled Realising innovative solutions with customers 2025.

Although Water Wise Societies is not a dedicated research programme, research plays a role in the transition towards the mission by building knowledge and data and developing new solutions and processes across all system dimensions. The programme office is actively engaged in horizon scanning and in 2025 analysed the funding landscape for projects in the field of research and innovation in terms of which funding bodies have calls for proposals related to the mission, as well as which areas have previously received funding. This work will be published in the spring of 2026.

#### **2.1.4 International strategy and activities**

The programme has established structured and forward-looking international work in its first two years. The internationalisation strategy is aiming to bring knowledge back to Sweden, strengthen stakeholders that contribute to Swedish competitiveness and achieve greater impact through the global dissemination of solutions and innovations. This work has been conducted in close communication with Formas, Business Sweden and programme members to identify needs and opportunities. The programme has engaged in several international initiatives, including participation in Water4All, and has held initial meetings on potential collaborations with several international organisations, such as the International Water Association, Water Europe, the World Health Organization and the UN World Food Programme. Water Wise Societies has also been presented to several international delegations and held discussions with major companies to attract new and innovative solutions to Sweden.

Europe and the EU are of particular importance given the strong research collaboration, the significant market for trade and the extensive body of EU policy in respect of the water sector. 2025 saw the launch of the EU's Water Resilience Strategy, which essentially aligns closely with the programme's

goals and tasks. The programme office has identified ten or so activities where the work of the programme can assist with the work of the new EU strategy. This is why the programme office participated in the first EU Water Resilience Forum in Brussels on 8 December 2025 and is planning to increase its involvement and collaboration with the EU at various levels to this end.

## **2.2 Calls for proposals and projects are driving the transition**

Water Wise Societies has a budget for research and innovation initiatives (calls for proposals, primarily) averaging SEK 100 million per annum, with a lower budget in the first two years and increasing as the programme's initiatives are implemented. The programme office's budget also provides opportunities for proactive activities to increase the scope for transition, and that is why calls for proposals for research and innovation initiatives are the programme's biggest and most important tool.

To achieve the desired impact from investments in research and innovation, the initiatives are required to address identified needs for transition within the ten tasks, and the purpose and design of activities and initiatives must be aligned with the theory of change. Activities and projects also need to be interlinked, capitalising and building on results, to avoid implementing fragmented individual projects with no cumulative impact. The programme office plays a crucial role in these respects and has therefore created a process for active programme and portfolio management and coordination. Portfolio management forms an integral part of the development of future activities and calls for proposals. This work is done every six months in collaboration with members, the programme council and the steering committee and in discussion with administrators. The continuous horizon scanning carried out by the programme office is an important input. The Impact Innovation steering committee ultimately decides on the action plan and its calls for proposals for the period in question.

Seven calls for proposals were launched in 2024 and 2025<sup>4</sup>, and five of these have closed and decisions have been made. The two most recent calls for proposals will close in early 2026.

- Collaboration for sustainable water for all 2024 – 20 projects awarded funding

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<sup>4</sup> All calls for proposals are available to view at <https://waterwisesocieties.se/utlysningar/>

- Strategic projects: Water resource teams – a potential route to local and regional stakeholder collaboration in order to prevent and minimise risks in catchment areas – 2 projects awarded funding
- Acceptance and behavioural change within Water Wise Societies 2025 – 13 projects awarded funding
- Realising innovative solutions with customers within Water Wise Societies 2025 – 8 projects awarded funding
- Transition lab within Water Wise Societies 2025 – 9 projects awarded funding
- Policy lab within Water Wise Societies 2025 – closes in February 2026
- Innovations that can change systems – closes in March 2026

Below, the outcomes of the program's first call—where the projects have now been completed—are described and analysed, along with the results of the largest call to date for transition labs. This is followed by a reflection on the project portfolio as a whole.

## **2.2.1 Collaboration for Sustainable Water for All 2024**

May 2024 saw the opening of the programme's first call for proposals, Collaboration for Sustainable Water for All, as part of the Water Wise Societies 2024 programme<sup>5</sup>. This call for proposals related to small-scale mobilising preparatory projects (feasibility studies) that were to address the challenges of the programme using a systems approach. Collaboration between at least three parties was required, as well as work across several system dimensions.

Ramboll has conducted a portfolio analysis on behalf of the programme office which shows that the projects were distributed in a manner that covered all the goals. The analysis of the distribution across the ten different tasks showed that some tasks, such as Adapting society to flooding and drought and Recycling and reusing water and its resources, received significantly more applications than other tasks, such as Sustainable water abstraction. Some areas appear to have reached a higher level of maturity than others. Going forward, the programme office may need to undertake goaled initiatives in order to ensure implementation of projects covering all tasks.

The 20 projects awarded funding bring together a total of 139 stakeholders. On average, each project involves seven stakeholders. The public sector dominates among participating stakeholders. The business community is

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<sup>5</sup> The Collaboration for Sustainable Water for All call for proposals within the Water Wise Societies 2024 programme: <https://waterwisesocieties.se/utlysning/impact-innovation-samverkan-for-hallbart-vatten/>

mainly represented by various consultancy firms. Water and wastewater companies are involved in 14 of the 20 projects awarded funding. Consultancy firms are involved in five of the projects. Eleven of the 20 projects awarded funding are coordinated by a research institute.

The projects awarded funding all maintain an integrated approach to the five system dimensions; which indicates that many stakeholders have the ability to work with system dimensions in an integrated manner. Most of the projects focused on analysis. This is natural given the fact that these were small and short-term preparatory projects, but it may also be a sign that many stakeholders are still unsure of how to work specifically on integrating the system dimensions in order to bring about genuine transformation. This capability needs to be strengthened over the coming years to avoid the system dimensions becoming merely theoretical analytical concepts used to describe complex problems.

The programme's funding of 20 pilot projects, has created a broad base of initiatives on which to build. Of the nine transition labs that have received funding, most have been funded as feasibility studies in the first round.

## **2.2.2 Transition lab within Water Wise Societies**

Water Wise Societies' biggest call for proposals to date is Transition labs within Water Wise Societies<sup>6</sup>. This call for proposals aims to fund broad stakeholder groups that are addressing complex challenges within the tasks to explore, develop, test and, ultimately, demonstrate solutions in a systems perspective. These stakeholder groups are expected to evolve into collaborative and interacting autonomous groups known as transition labs. The call for proposals is intended to be repeated, and the projects funded in 2025 may potentially continue for up to nine years.

In this first round of transition labs, nine projects working within all ten of the programme's tasks – either directly or indirectly – were awarded funding. The projects are led and coordinated by needs owners and have a total of 84 different stakeholders as partners. The median number of partners per project is eleven. The partners cover the principal segments of the programme's stakeholder survey (such as municipalities and water and wastewater organisations, companies in business and industry, public authorities and regions, universities and institutes, and water conservation associations). However, the portfolio analysis conducted by the programme office shows that parts of the mission and certain sectors are not covered,

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<sup>6</sup> <https://waterwisesocieties.se/utlysning/impact-innovation-omstallningslabb-inom-water-wise-societies-2025-for-hallbart-vatten-for-alla/>

despite the broad distribution of tasks and the large number of stakeholders involved in projects awarded funding. This may be due to a lack of mobilisation in some areas and fierce competition in the evaluation of applications, which generally received high scores. Additional priority tasks and areas within the mission may need to be mobilised and prioritised in future calls for proposals regarding transition labs.

### 2.2.3 Calls for proposals have produced a broad portfolio of projects

In 2024 and 2025, a total of 52 projects has been awarded, with a combined budget of SEK 201 million, of which SEK 139 million consists of grants. Overall, the calls issued to date have resulted in a wide range of projects addressing all three of the programme’s goals and all ten of its tasks (Figure 8). Some of the tasks attracted fewer applications and received fewer funded projects than others, which may justify increased focus and mobilization efforts going forward. Examples include Reduce negative impact on aquatic ecosystems (few projects and low budget); Build and manage society in harmony with water (low budget); and Adapt society to flooding and drought (few projects and low budget).

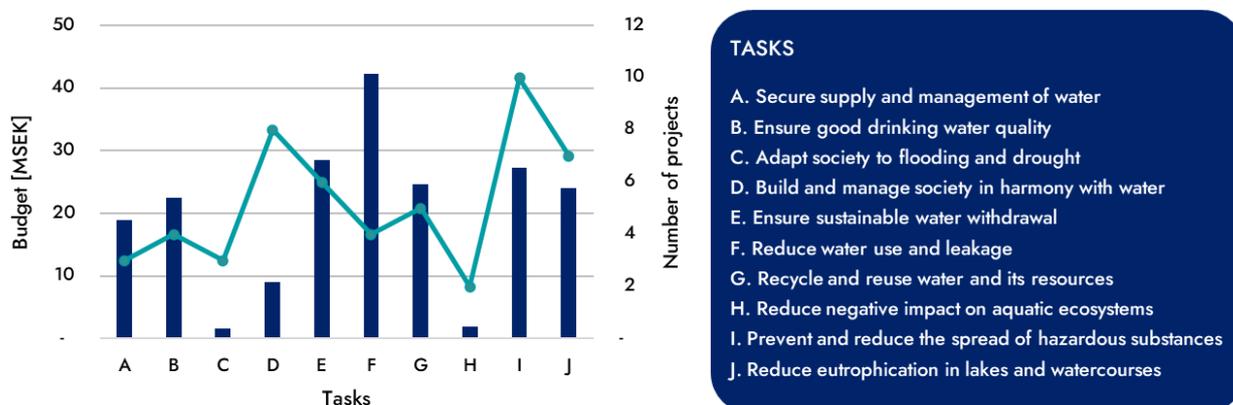


Figure 8. Distribution of projects (line, number) and total project budget (bars, SEK million) by tasks. The primary task addressed by each project has been classified based on the project summary.

Both the overall portfolio of applications and the projects awarded funding show that the programme has mobilised a large number and broad range of stakeholders (Figure 9). However, some sectors are not represented, while others have found it more difficult to submit successful applications. The programme office must continue working with mobilisation efforts and support them in the application process. In geographical terms, project partners include stakeholders from all over Sweden, from Trelleborg in the south to Boden in the north. However, stakeholders in southern Sweden predominate among organisations coordinating projects awarded funding.

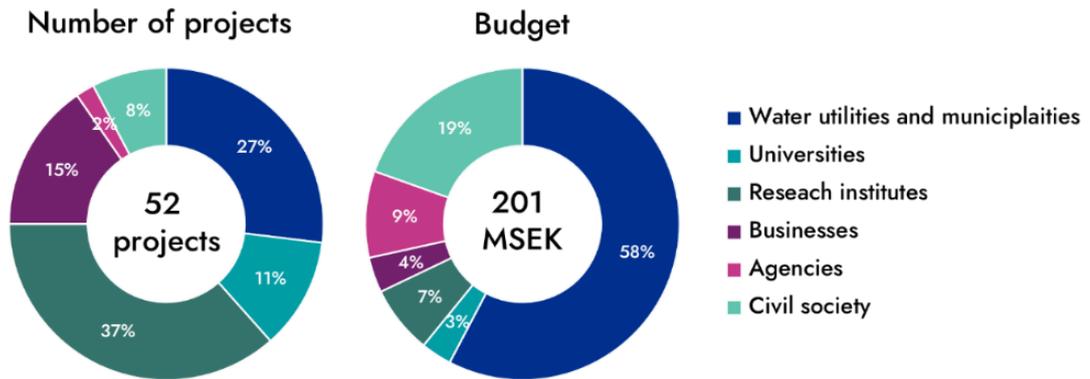


Figure 9. Distribution of projects by the coordinator's type of organization, shown as number of projects (left) and total project budget (right).

The five system dimensions have been covered well by the calls for proposals (Figure 10). Three of the calls for proposals (Collaboration for sustainable water, Transition labs and Innovations that can change systems) have included all five dimensions and resulted in projects that work broadly across them. Three other calls (Acceptance and behavioural change, Strategic projects, and Policy lab – not decided) have focused on dimensions where goaled initiatives were deemed necessary to stimulate activity. For 2026, a further targeted initiative is planned in respect of the Money and value system dimension, which fewer projects have as their focus at the time of writing.

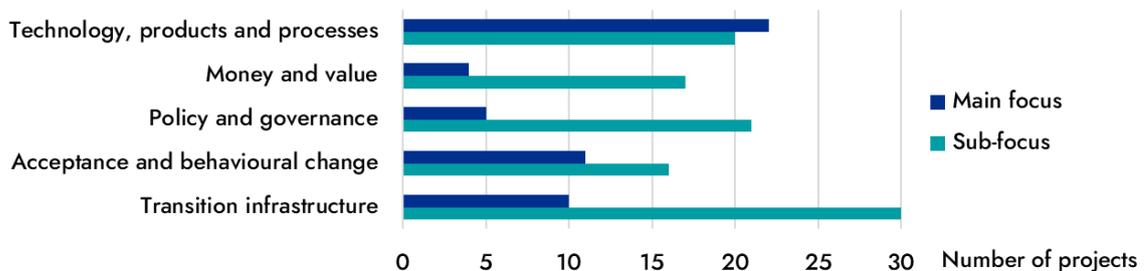


Figure 10. Distribution of projects based on the system dimensions. In the classification, each project has been assigned one primary system dimension but may have several additional system dimensions as secondary focuses. The classification is based on each project's summary.

## 2.3 Gender equality and equal opportunities

Gender equality is included in all four open calls as part of how projects are expected to be planned, implemented and followed up. The texts emphasise the fact that women and men should be able to participate on equal terms and exercise genuine influence within the projects; and so, the assessment concerns not only representation, but also the distribution of power, responsibilities and resources within the project group. Several calls require

applicants to actively analyse whether sex and gender perspectives are relevant to problems, solutions and anticipated impacts, and to describe gender equality as an integral part of the project plan rather than a separate add-on.

It is important for initiatives and activities to be designed to consider the needs and circumstances of different groups, thereby strengthening equality and inclusion. The composition of the project team, including its gender balance, is used as an indicator when assessing the project's potential; and several calls for proposals link gender equality to quality and impact by emphasising the fact that broader perspectives provide better solutions and decisions.

Accessibility and dissemination of results are also emphasised by means of requirements or expectations regarding open access to knowledge, for instance. Overall, the calls for proposals show that gender equality, equal opportunities and inclusion are viewed as key to the creation of sustainable, relevant and useful innovations within Water Wise Societies.

Accessibility is also clearly embedded in the way in which the programme works. Hybrid meetings and the option of participation online reduce geographical and practical barriers. Early advance information ahead of calls for proposals lowers thresholds, while careful use of language and the use of plain language enhance opportunities for participation on equal terms.

## **2.4 Voices from members**

The programme has conducted interviews with a selection of its members in preparation for the Impact Innovation Report. The programme has also been studied by Erik Brattström, a postdoctoral researcher affiliated with CIRCLE at Lund University<sup>7</sup>. Erik has interviewed water and wastewater organisations that are members of Water Wise Societies. His findings will be published separately, but he has been actively involved in developing the content of this report.

Water and wastewater organisations perceive Water Wise Societies as a unique opportunity to jointly address major system challenges by providing collaborative environments and resources for working with this strategically and over the long term. The programme also provides opportunities to test and scale up existing technological solutions. Smaller organisations in particular find that collaboration enables them to benefit from larger organisations with more experience. Larger stakeholders express a

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.circle.lu.se>

responsibility to take the lead and generate results that smaller municipalities can capitalise on to strengthen the collective innovation capacity of the sector.

The development and expansion of various networks is described as one of the programme's most immediate and tangible added values. Through the projects, many water and wastewater organisations, particularly the smaller ones, have come into contact with new partners – other water and wastewater organisations as well as universities, public authorities, energy companies and experts outside the traditional water and wastewater sphere – which has broadened their networks and opened doors to new collaborations. The requirement to build broad consortia for different calls for proposals has mobilised new collaborations between water and wastewater organisations, industrial parks, major industrial corporations and universities.

Even though not all applications have been awarded funding, the work on the applications has resulted in new stakeholder combinations and new perspectives on aspects such as technical water, process water and business models. However, the call process itself risks excluding stakeholders who lack the experience and ability to compile applications. State aid rules also make it difficult to engage stakeholders from the private sector or public authorities, which are often needed to scale up and disseminate new solutions. Some stakeholders are concerned that there will be competition between calls for funds intended for research and funds intended for innovation and scaling. This reflects a fundamental tension within the national research and innovation ecosystem.

The programme provides a unique opportunity to jointly pursue strategic issues with policymakers. Smaller water and wastewater organisations in particular view this as important as a way of making their voices heard.

## 3 Looking ahead

In its initial phase, the programme has mobilised stakeholders of strategic importance for fulfilling the mission. The programme is already widely supported among water producers, but it needs to involve more of the stakeholders responsible for large-scale consumption of

water. The programme also needs to promote more systematic efforts on the theory of change to ensure the necessary transition towards the mission.

### **3.1 Evolution of the Water Wise Societies portfolio towards the mission**

In the interviews, several members describe Water Wise Societies as a welcome boost for everyone working on water-related issues. The programme has placed water issues within a systems perspective, inspiring and enabling new collaborations and activities.

The portfolio analysis shows that the current portfolio is engaged with all goals and tasks. Active portfolio analysis and management – based on the tasks, system dimensions, actor combinations and geographical spread, for example – allow the programme office to identify where the transition is needed most; but also, where initiatives have the greatest potential to generate impact.

The process for identifying and developing initiatives has acquired a good overall structure in 2025. The programme office first collects input from members and gains support from the steering committee and programme council and then designs the action plan on a six-monthly basis in dialogue with the funding authorities. The evaluation of Impact Innovation that was conducted by the OECD in 2025 [6] showed that the toolkit of potential initiatives for mission-oriented innovation is not yet sufficiently comprehensive. At present, initiatives are limited to open calls for proposals and mission strategy considerations, which hinders the programme's ability to work towards fulfilment of the mission. According to the OECD's conclusions, these risks limiting the effect of Impact Innovation and making the programmes less likely to achieve their defined objectives. Impact Innovation, in consultation with the programmes, needs to develop the toolkit of potential initiatives still further.

The processes for analysis and programme and portfolio management will continue to be developed to incorporate all relevant perspectives and enable the visualisation, evaluation and communication of the extensive efforts of the programme, and to use this analysis in the planning of initiatives. With additional resources for the programme office, work is also starting on the coordination of ongoing projects. This is a key function for linking project results and generating cumulative impact in a mission-oriented manner.

In 2026, the programme office's work on horizon scanning will also continue and be both broadened and deepened. This will increase the capacity and ability of members, stakeholders and needs owners in the system to formulate projects that will help to fulfil the mission.

A systems perspective and broad, deep engagement among stakeholders and needs owners within the system are a fundamental prerequisite for fulfilment of the ambitious mission. One consequence of this breadth is that there are also conflicts within and between different goals. This is something that the programme office will need to address and manage in its continued communications with the members of the programme, stakeholders in the system and needs owners.

## **3.2 Reflections on stakeholders and mobilisation**

The broad mobilisation of stakeholders from source to shore and the creation of a new arena for them to meet regarding the programme's mission is highlighted as one of the most significant impacts during the programme's start-up period. At the same time, this poses a challenge for the programme. The stakeholders who have chosen to become members have expectations of the programme and ultimately anticipate it benefiting their own organisations. Interviews with selected representatives from member organisations show that the programme has largely met expectations in its first few years, but there are also more critical reflections.

At the same time, the programme office has been actively engaged in dialogue and feedback, responded to comments received and allocated time for capacity building through aspects such as transition arena meetings, individual meetings with members and council meetings. The aim has been to enhance understanding of how the work of stakeholders relates to the mission-oriented approach of the programme. The programme office is also seeing a growing willingness among stakeholders to collaborate, create projects and contribute to positive synergies between different stakeholders.

The portfolio analysis shows that a wide range of stakeholders are coordinating the projects, but that at the same time these are mainly medium to large stakeholders, as well as stakeholders with an already strong commitment to water issues. Other stakeholders from the business community or smaller municipalities, for example, do not have the same level of representation. Smaller municipalities, civil society organisations and parts of the business community have expressed a desire for assistance in finding a clear role and gaining access to the various calls for proposals. The programme office is also perceiving an increasing willingness and ability

among stakeholders to address these challenges by collaborating and interacting, thereby benefiting from one another's strengths.

Another way of reaching out and engaging underrepresented sectors of the business community is to interact with other research and innovation programmes. Some important examples where discussions are already taking place are the Impact Innovation programmes Swedish Metals and Minerals and Net Zero Industry (working with the mining, metals and manufacturing industries), Viable Cities (working with climate-related challenges in cities) and BioSociety (working with the green industries). Internationalisation emerges as another area in which several voices perceive value in adopting a more comprehensive approach in order to incorporate more ideas and experiences.

### **3.3 A shift from collaboration to co-creation and further towards interaction**

The increasing willingness to interact and collaborate has initially been fuelled by the Water Wise Societies transition arena. The outcomes of applications submitted in response to the calls for proposals (both approved and rejected) show that these calls have also attracted new stakeholders and created new collaborations. The transition labs awarded funding will also help to strengthen the capacity for interaction.

One key challenge relates to the use of language and the level of abstraction in documents and calls for proposals, but also in various meetings within the transition arena, for example. Several participating stakeholders find certain concepts difficult to understand and far from everyday 'engineering language'. The academic approach can make it difficult to gain support for the work internally, particularly within smaller organisations. That is why there is a need to explain and use simpler terms to forge clearer links with established practices. For instance, it is not clear what 'transition' means in practice. In turn, this makes it difficult to identify a clear shift from the current situation to a desired future.

One important reason to participate in the programme is that it creates new networks that contribute new knowledge and engagement. It is important to be aware of the risk that using overly 'academic' language may lead to a decrease in engagement over time.

## **3.4 Lowering thresholds for gender equality, equal opportunities and inclusion**

Several findings highlighted in interviews and emerging from discussions within the organisation can be translated into future action. The findings point to several measures that may lower thresholds, facilitate participation in practice and ensure that more perspectives have a genuine impact.

Developing advance information ahead of calls for proposals is one such example. Providing signals early on makes it easier for even less experienced stakeholders to mobilise, find collaborations and submit thoroughly prepared applications. That is why the programme office will be presenting a strategy and a long-term plan of action with a view to creating clarity and predictability for both stakeholders and funding authorities. The programme is also reviewing how hybrid and digital formats can be used more consistently, as this is described in the interviews as crucial for participation when travel distances, time and personal circumstances would otherwise limit involvement.

Adapting language and expression in both meetings and documentation appears to be crucial as a way of enabling more people to absorb information and contribute on equal terms. At the same time, the programme's multi-professional breadth is described as a clear strength. This can be utilised even more effectively through communication and working methods that accommodate several different perspectives and professional logics at the same time.

The interviews also indicate a willingness to broaden mobilisation beyond the established core by means of more forums and partnerships allowing new perspectives. The programme will also be developing the design of meeting venues so that they continue to be perceived as meaningful and useful; this is necessary to maintain and drive engagement and encourage wider participation over time.

## **3.5 Reflections on measurement and evaluation**

The Water Wise Societies' goals and tasks have been formulated in dialogue with its members. The objectives are broad so that they cover the range of challenges that the programme needs to address. In several of the interviews, different stakeholders describe the objectives as engaging, and as something around which they can all unite. One important reason is their involvement in developing the objectives; this creates a sense of ownership and, in turn, motivates different stakeholders to invest time and resources in

achieving the objectives. Such a process is difficult to measure and evaluate using quantitative metrics alone. It can also be difficult to identify a clear baseline.

One way of making the programme's effects visible in the five system dimensions is to describe transformative outcomes; that is, the qualitative changes and processes required for a fundamental system transition to take place. Unlike traditional key performance indicators (KPIs) that focus on linear and gradual improvement of bounded systems, these transformative outcomes serve as indicators of the fact that the underlying rules, norms and structures of society are changing direction. This involves tracing how niches are built, how regimes are destabilised and how new linkages between systems emerge. Most Significant Change [4] and Ripple Effects Mapping [5] are two methods specifically developed for describing and evaluating complex development processes.

During the period until the theory of change is updated (2027) and the next Impact Innovation Report is published (2028), the programme will be working on developing the impact logic on the basis of these insights and systematically using these methods for evaluation in order to capture the breadth and diversity of all the processes initiated and driven within the programme.

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