

Environment Agency

Joining-up surface water and drainage management planning in the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor

Final Report

Reference:

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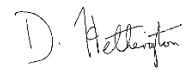


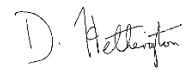


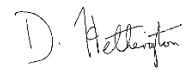
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Executive summary

Water management in England is delivered through a complex landscape of organisations, plans and statutory responsibilities. Lead Local Flood Authorities (LLFAs) and Water and Sewerage Companies (WaSCs) play key but distinct roles in managing surface water flooding, drainage capacity and water quality. While there is growing policy and regulatory emphasis on collaboration and integrated water management, in practice planning and delivery remain fragmented. This limits the ability of partners to identify shared priorities, align investment, and deliver place-based, multi-benefit solutions.

This project has been commissioned by the Oxcam team, part of the Environment Agency, as part of the Integrated Water Management Programme. This project explored how surface water management planning undertaken by local authorities, for example through Local Flood Risk Management Strategies (LFRMS) and Surface Water Management Plans (SWMP), could be better aligned with Drainage and Wastewater Management Plans (DWMPs) produced by WaSCs. Using the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor as the overall focus, the project used an area in West Northamptonshire as its case study. The aim was to develop practical ways of working that support joint planning and delivery of multi-partner interventions.

A review of the water planning landscape, stakeholder engagement, and analysis of existing case studies and guidance identified key constraints and opportunities. The research found that, given the wide range of potential approaches to joint planning, it is neither practical nor beneficial to prescribe a single method. Instead, there is greater value in establishing a structured workflow that incorporates existing best practice and supports consistent, practical implementation.

The findings also demonstrated that organisations collaborate from different starting points, reflecting variations in responsibilities, objectives, resources and spatial focus. Partnerships exist across a spectrum of maturity, from early-stage coordination to well-established, joined-up working arrangements. As such, any effective approach must be flexible and scalable, capable of accommodating different entry points, supporting varying levels of engagement, and operating across a range of spatial and organisational scales.

In response, the project developed a ten-stage Collaborative Approach designed to sit alongside existing project lifecycles and funding processes. The Collaborative Approach provides a structured workflow, supported by prompts, suggested actions and links to further information, to guide users through joint planning activities. Recognising differing levels of partnership maturity, it includes three pathways - Emerging, Growing and Mature - enabling organisations to select an appropriate route based on their current relationships, capacity and ambitions, and to adapt as these may change. The Collaborative Approach can be applied at multiple scales, from local project-level challenges to wider strategic programmes. It is presented as an interactive resource to support usability and accessibility. Individual activities can also be carried out as stand-alone steps to complement any existing arrangements.

Parts of the Collaborative Approach were trialled in West Northamptonshire and refined based on feedback from project partners. The collaborative approach provides a practical mechanism to support organisations in moving from parallel planning towards more integrated, place-based and collaborative delivery.

The challenges addressed, such as fragmented planning, misaligned investment cycles, and limited coordination, are widely experienced across England. While the Collaborative Approach has been developed in this spatial context, its core principles are intended to be scalable, transferable and applicable across other geographies and water planning activities.

The project also identified a number of ongoing challenges to effective collaboration, including constraints on partner capacity and resourcing, difficulties aligning funding cycles and programmes, and variability in the availability and currency of data. Maintaining engagement over time and translating strategic alignment into delivery also remain key considerations. Addressing these challenges will require continued refinement of the Collaborative Approach, alongside sustained commitment from partners.

Overall, the project demonstrates that the key barrier to effective joint planning is not a lack of tools, but the need for a clearer and more adaptable way of working. The Collaborative Approach provides a workflow to move from parallel planning towards coordinated, place-based delivery, supporting better alignment of priorities, investment and outcomes.

Abbreviations

Acronym / Abbreviation	Definition
AWS	Anglian Water Services
BBC	Bedford Borough Council
CBC	Central Bedfordshire Council
DWMPs	Drainage Water Management Plans
EA	Environment Agency
eNGOs	Environmental Non-Governmental Organisation
FCERM	Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management
GIS	Geographic Information System
IDPs	Infrastructure Delivery Plans
IWM	Integrated Water Management
LFMRS	Local Flood Risk Management Strategies
LLFA	Lead Local Flood Authority
MAGs	Multi-Agency Groups
NbS	Nature-based Solutions
NCC	Northamptonshire County Council
NIDP	Northumbrian Integrated Drainage Partnership
OxCam	Oxford to Cambridge
RAIN	Resilience and Innovation Northants
STW	Severn Trent Water
SuDS	Sustainable Drainage Systems
SWMPs	Surface Water Management Plans
UKWIR	United Kingdom Water Industry Research
WaSCs	Water and Sewerage Companies
WINEP	Water Industry National Environment Programme
WNC	West Northamptonshire Council

1. Introduction and project context

1.1 Introduction

Water management within England is complex. Multiple agencies and organisations play important roles in managing water, with differing statutory responsibilities, legislative guidelines, aims, and drivers that they each consider. The current system has many components that include water resource (supply), flood risk management, water quality, and environment planning. As demonstrated by the findings of the Cunliffe review¹ published in July 2025, pressure is increasing on the water industry to make changes that benefit consumers, the environment, infrastructure, and increase readiness/adaptability to climate change impacts.

Integrated water management (IWM) is a collaborative approach that considers the entire water cycle in land and water governance. Instead of addressing water challenges independently, which can often be fragmented among various organisations, the concept of IWM relies on addressing multiple issues simultaneously, thereby pooling resources to deliver wider and more impactful cross-cutting benefits. This holistic approach unites water disciplines into a single framework. It also connects with other aspects of spatial planning and development while incorporating nature-positive goals to provide social, environmental, and economic benefits. Although IWM is not a new concept, there is a growing effort to explore its potential within the UK, aiming to identify the most effective methods for achieving greater integration and collaboration in the water sector.

Achieving an integrated water sector through IWM is complex. A practical method to address this issue is to pinpoint a particular space where integration drivers are present and explore ways to create better alignment. Surface water, drainage and waste water management, particularly in the context of flood risk and water quality, has been chosen as the focus area by the Environment Agency (EA) in the scoping of this project.

The insights developed through the Oxford–Cambridge Growth Corridor are intended to be broadly applicable beyond the study area. Findings are presented at a general level throughout the report, with examples from the Corridor used to illustrate key points and provide supporting evidence. The approach is designed to be transferable across England and potentially more widely, with local adaptation as needed while retaining the core principles and themes.

1.2 Project aims and drivers

The project's aim was to develop **ways of working** to enable a **place-based approach** to the design and delivery of **multi-partner interventions** for surface water management within the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor and elsewhere in England. It was driven by a need to build on learning from previous projects through small, achievable improvements to integrated water planning, and to support preparation of DWMP Cycle 2, which sets out updated requirements including consideration of wider drainage systems, interdependencies, and co-benefits.

The project supports the joint planning and delivery of Surface Water (or the surface water elements of statutory Local Flood Risk Management Strategy) and Drainage and Wastewater Management Plans (SWMPs and DWMPs) objectives. The intended outcome was to move towards an integrated approach to surface water and drainage management that enables effective place-based multi-partner interventions, which provides multiple benefits such as enhanced flood management and water quality improvements. This would enable partners to each work towards their objectives whilst providing combined benefits to the communities that they serve. Fluvial and groundwater flooding and water supply were not considered within this study in order to keep the project objectives focused on tangible pragmatic outcomes.

The Oxcam team commissioned Arup to deliver this project collaboratively with the aim of developing ways of working that are applicable across the Oxford and Cambridge Growth Corridor, with an ambition to frame

¹ Independent Water Commission (2025) *Independent Water Commission: review of the water sector*. GOV.UK. Published 03/06/25. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-water-commission-review-of-the-water-sector> (Accessed 02/03/2026)

the outputs in the national context. Part of the approach was trialled within West Northamptonshire. The project partners involved were (alphabetically):

- Anglian Water Services (AWS)
- Bedford Borough Council (BBC)
- Central Bedfordshire Council (CBC)
- Defra
- Environment Agency
- West Northamptonshire Council (WNC)

The key terms used in the project aim are defined in the following section.

1.3 Definition of terms

Ways of working - Ways of working describe how partners collaborate to plan and deliver shared outcomes, encompassing the culture, behaviours, structures, and tools that enable effective joint working. They encompass both the practical arrangements (e.g. meeting structures, shared digital platforms, decision-making protocols) and the cultural aspects (e.g. trust, openness, inclusivity, flexibility) that underpin effective collaboration.

In the context of collaborative planning for surface water, drainage and catchment management, the ways of working within and between organisations are as important as the technical approach. They provide the foundation for trust, transparency, and sustained progress between organisations with different roles, priorities, and funding mechanisms.

Strong ways of working should:

- **Build shared purpose** - establish a collective understanding of goals, drivers, and success measures.
- **Enable open communication** - use consistent, transparent channels for sharing data, evidence, and decisions.
- **Provide clear governance** - define how decisions are made, by whom, and when.
- **Support coordinated delivery** - align programmes, funding cycles, and investment plans where possible.
- **Promote inclusivity and mutual respect** - ensure that each partner's knowledge, constraints, and drivers are valued.
- **Embed learning and adaptation** - review progress regularly and evolve approaches as contexts change.
- **Encourage innovation and flexibility** - make space for creative, nature-based, and place-based solutions that go beyond business-as-usual.
- Developing effective ways-of-working early in the partnership helps to avoid duplication, clarify responsibilities, and create the conditions for sustained collaboration.

Place-based approach - A place-based approach focuses on designing and delivering solutions that respond to the specific characteristics, challenges, and opportunities of a local area. In the context of integrated water management, it means aligning water, land-use, and environmental planning to deliver multiple locally relevant benefits, such as reduced flood risk, improved water quality, enhanced biodiversity, climate resilience, and social and economic value. Such solutions are often more integrated and complex than traditional, single-purpose approaches, drawing on nature-based and blue-green infrastructure to achieve sustainable, long-term outcomes through collaboration between organisations operating in the same place.

In practice, a place-based approach involves joining up spatial planning, infrastructure investment, and environmental management so that decisions made by local authorities, WaSCs, and other partners are coherent and complement one another. It aligns with the principles of the Environment Act 2021 and the National Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management (FCERM) Strategy, both of which emphasise collaboration across sectors and scales to build resilient, sustainable, and nature-positive places.

By focusing on outcomes that matter locally such as reducing surface water flooding, improving water quality, enhancing green-blue infrastructure, and supporting climate adaptation, a place-based approach helps ensure that water management contributes directly to the wider ambitions of local plans, nature recovery strategies, and community resilience.

Multi-partner interventions – A multi-partner intervention is defined as an **action, scheme, or project** that is jointly developed, funded, or delivered by two or more organisations to achieve shared place-based outcomes, such as reducing flood risk, improving water quality, enhancing biodiversity, enriching social amenity value and supporting community resilience. These interventions typically:

- **Address multiple drivers** - such as surface water and sewer flooding, pollution from combined sewer overflows, water quality improvement, and climate resilience.
- **Integrate planning frameworks** - by aligning the priorities and evidence bases of, for example, Local Flood Risk Management Strategies (LFRMSs), Surface Water Management Plans (SWMPs), and DWMPs.
- **Pool investment and delivery** - enabling more cost-effective and resilient outcomes through joint funding, shared data, and coordinated delivery programmes.
- **Prioritise nature-based and blue-green solutions** - such as SuDS retrofits, floodplain restoration, or upstream attenuation that deliver multiple benefits across sectors.
- **Deliver multiple outcomes** - reducing flood and pollution risks while enhancing biodiversity, public amenity, and carbon sequestration in line with climate adaptation and environmental targets.
- **Promote adaptive, place-based planning** - focusing on the needs of specific catchments or communities and supporting long-term integration between surface water and wastewater management.

In summary, a multi-partner intervention acts as the practical delivery mechanism for joint planning, in this case where local authorities and WaSCs translate aligned strategies (e.g. LFRMS and DWMP) into shared, investable projects that achieve multiple outcomes for people, the environment, and infrastructure.

1.4 Project phases

The structure of the project was as phased follows:

- Project phase 1. Understand any existing relationships, gaps in joint working, and gaps in evidence and risks in the form of an Information Review. Section 2 of this report summarises this project phase, with the detailed report contained in Appendix A.1.
- Project phase 2. Design and shortlist approaches to join the two plans together (DWMPs and SWMPs), which go beyond the statutory requirements outlined for DWMPs. Section 3 summarises this project phase, with the detailed report contained in Appendix A.2.
- Project phase 3. Select an approach and trial the method in an agreed location. This is summarised in Section 4, with the detailed report contained in Appendix A.3.
- Project phase 4. Review learnings from the test and trial, along with feedback from project partners and use these insights to refine and improve the approach. This is summarised in Sections 3, 4 and 5. Detailed feedback from partner workshops is located in Appendix A.4.
- Project phase 5. Critically evaluate the approach and report findings from the project, considering the wider learning recommendations (Section 2). Present the refined approach.

1.5 Related initiatives and information

A key related initiative is the **2016 UK Water Industry Research (UKWIR) report**, ‘*How best to align the funding processes with the various bodies involved in resolving flooding*’² (published 2020). The project’s objectives were to promote good practice in collaborative working between water and sewage companies (WaSCs) and their partners, develop common guiding principles to support future collaboration, and illustrate these principles with practical examples. These aims align closely with the objectives of this project.

The report identifies guiding principles and a collaborative workflow to enable collaboration opportunities between WaSCs with other organisations who have responsibilities for managing flood risk. Although the report covered all flooding mechanisms, wider than this project’s focus on surface water, many of its recommendations and case studies were applicable or could be adapted to this project. In particular, the work undertaken in this project expands on the structure created in the UKWIR report, modernising it to reflect the changing policy landscape.

Other related initiatives and information were identified through discussions during the project and across Phases 1 and 2, highlighting opportunities that could be used or leveraged in developing the approach. A summary of several of these initiatives is presented below:

- **Enabling Water Smart Communities (EWSC)**³: The EWSC project is an innovation programme (funded through Ofwat’s Water Breakthrough Challenge) that explores how integrated water management (IWM) can be embedded into housing and place-making. At its core, it aims to rethink how water is managed across the whole water cycle - linking water supply, wastewater, surface water, and the environment - with how communities and developments are designed and operated. The project focuses on breaking down barriers to more integrated water management by bringing sectors together, developing new frameworks and tools, testing new models through pilots, exploring enabling actions and building the case for change. The project is based on the concept of a “water smart community” as a place where water is central to design and planning, systems manage water holistically rather than in silos, communities play a role in stewardship and outcomes deliver multiple benefits. As such, the EWSC project aligns well with this project. Toolkits that align with the EWSC approaches include the ‘Design with Water 2.0’ collaborative tools for place-based outcomes⁴.
- **Fresh Futures – CIWEM guidance**: This emerging guidance, currently in development by the CIWEM, seeks to support more integrated and collaborative approaches to water management. Early outputs have informed this project’s approach, particularly in relation to partnership working and aligning objectives across organisations.
- **STREAM – water industry data portal**⁵: Developed by the UK water industry, STREAM is a shared data platform designed to improve access to and use of water-related data across organisations. It supports more informed decision-making and collaboration by enabling partners to share and analyse data consistently. The portal is referenced within this project as an example of enabling infrastructure for integrated planning.
- **Collaborative approach to asset management and maintenance**⁶: The outcome of this project (soon to be published) highlights the importance of improving data collection, standardisation and

² Cotton, A., Gill, E., Hardwick, S., Mallows, A. and Yeowell, A. (2016) *How best to align the funding processes with the various bodies involved in resolving flooding*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/603603cbd3bf7f0ab6856b59/SC150010_report.pdf (Accessed March 2026)

³ Enabling Water Smart Communities (2026). Available at <https://www.ewsc.org.uk/> (Accessed March 2026)

⁴ Arup (2026) <https://www.arup.com/insights/design-with-water-2-0-collaborative-tools-for-place-based-outcomes/> (Accessed April 2026)

⁵ Stream (2024) Stream water data platform. Available at: <https://www.streamwaterdata.co.uk/> (Accessed March 2026)

⁶ Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Arup, Open Data Institute, Merseyside Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Partnership and North West Regional Flood and Coastal Committee (2025) *Collaborative approach to asset management and maintenance: Phase I, II and III Reports*. (Accessed March 2026)

sharing across organisations to enable more proactive maintenance, reduce flood risk, and deliver significant economic benefits through avoided damages and more efficient use of resources.

- **ADEPT RAPA guidance⁷**: The Rapid Adaptation Pathways Assessment (RAPA) toolkit, developed by the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport (ADEPT) in partnership with the EA, provides a structured, workshop-based approach to support local authorities in planning for climate change impacts, particularly flood and coastal erosion risk. It enables stakeholders to collaboratively identify thresholds, explore adaptation options and develop flexible pathways for action under uncertainty. The toolkit is referenced in this report as an example of a practical framework for early-stage, partnership-based planning and decision-making.
- **Mainstreaming Nature-based Solutions⁸**: MNbS is a large-scale innovation programme funded through the Ofwat Innovation Fund, bringing together over 20 cross-sector partners to accelerate the adoption of NbS in the UK water sector. The programme focuses on removing systemic barriers that currently limit the uptake of NbS by bringing together multi-sector partners, identifying and overcoming barriers to scale, testing solutions through pilots and supporting new funding and delivery models. As such, the MNbS project aligns well with this project.

2. Constraints and opportunities in joining up surface water and drainage management planning

Project phase 1 involved an information review and a series of interviews to establish a baseline understanding of the existing relationships, constraints, and opportunities for integrating surface water and drainage management planning between WaSCs and local authorities. Using the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor as a case study, this focussed on Anglian Water Services (AWS) and the local authorities - West Northamptonshire Council (WNC), Central Bedfordshire Council (CBC), and Bedford Borough Council (BBC).

This section (Section 2) summarises the findings. The detailed methodology and findings are contained within Appendix A.1.

2.1 Existing situation

Complex space: Relevant plans produced by local authorities and WaSCs were reviewed to understand current approaches to surface water and drainage management and to identify opportunities for improved alignment. Discussions with project partners highlighted the complexity of this space, driven by the breadth of statutory and non-statutory plans, alongside historic legislation and legacy arrangements that continue to shape current practice.

Local authority organisation: The volume of documents is partly a consequence of local government structures and the distribution of functions across different tiers. In two-tier areas, LLFA responsibilities typically sit with county councils, while planning functions are held by district, borough or metropolitan authorities. In contrast, unitary authorities combine these functions within a single organisation, as is the case for WNC and CBC. More recently, combined authorities have been established to support greater devolution and additional responsibilities across multiple councils. Town, parish and community councils form the most local tier, with responsibility for maintaining local amenities. Changes to administrative boundaries over time further contribute to fragmentation, with some documents no longer aligned to current LLFA boundaries.

⁷ ADEPT and Environment Agency (2025) Rapid Adaptation Pathways Assessment Toolkit. Available at: <https://www.adeptnet.org.uk/documents/rapid-adaptation-pathways-assessment-toolkit> (Accessed March 2026)

⁸ Mainstreaming Nature-based Solutions (2025). Available at <https://mainstreamingnbs.org/> (Accessed March 2026)

Local authority key information: From a local authority perspective, the following key documents were identified and considered as part of the information review. One statutory document was included in the form of the LFRMS and one non-statutory document was included in the form of an SWMP. Note there were three SWMPs available, for Daventry (2017), South Northamptonshire (2017) and Northampton (2014). These three districts were merged to become West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) in 2021. The documents selected for further review are noted as follows:

- Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) LFRMS (2016)⁹
- NCC Action Plan (2020)¹⁰
- LFRMS GIS and Prioritisation Report (2016)¹¹
- Daventry SWMP (2016)¹²

SWMPs: Feedback from local authority project partners indicated a lack of consistency in the identification and use of key documents across authorities. For example, while outlined in the project scope, SWMPs are non-statutory and regarded as best practice, meaning they are not universally in place. Where SWMPs do exist, they may be dated and not actively used.

WaSC key information – DWMPs: DWMPs are plans for how WaSCs will manage and develop their drainage system and sewerage system so as to be able to meet its obligations. They are carried out in 5-year cycles, and these plans are currently in their first cycle, after being published in early 2023. The final DWMP for cycle 2 should be published by the 31st of August 2028. AWS are the sewerage undertaker for the Oxford and Cambridge Growth Corridor study area. Their Cycle 1 DWMP was reviewed in detail as part of this study and is a clear focal point of planning for AWS. Work is underway for Cycle 2.

Partner interviews and information synthesis: Following the information review exercise, project partner interviews were conducted to assist with understanding the status of relationships between partners, identify if there are any important blockers or potential enablers for alignment. An area of specific interest going into these interviews was to better understand the communication points between local authorities and AWS in relation to drainage and surface water flooding and quality.

Themes arising from interviews and information synthesis: When analysed, five themes emerged into which the majority of information could be grouped:

- **Resource and capacity constraints,**
- **Differences in priorities and priority locations,**
- **Data availability, quality and sharing,**
- **Communication and clarity of responsibility,**
- **Misalignment of organisational and funding cycles.**
- There was also a sixth cross-cutting theme identified, that related to **legislation clarity and strength.**

⁹ Northamptonshire County Council (2016) *Northamptonshire Local Flood Risk Management Strategy*. Available at: <https://www.westnorthants.gov.uk/flooding-and-flood-risk-management/local-flood-risk-management-strategy> (Accessed March 2026)

¹⁰ Northamptonshire County Council (2020) *Northamptonshire Local Flood Risk Management Strategy Action Plan Update 2020*. Available at: <https://www.westnorthants.gov.uk/flooding-and-flood-risk-management/local-flood-risk-management-strategy> (Accessed March 2026)

¹¹ Northamptonshire County Council (2016) *Northamptonshire LFRMS Update – GIS and Prioritisation*. Available at: <https://www.westnorthants.gov.uk/flooding-and-flood-risk-management/local-flood-risk-management-strategy> (Accessed March 2026)

¹² Northamptonshire County Council (2017) *Northamptonshire Surface Water Management Plans – Daventry District Detailed Assessment*. Available at: <https://www.westnorthants.gov.uk/flooding-and-flood-risk-management/statutory-and-project-documents-flood-risk> (Accessed March 2026)

These are discussed further in the following sections under the context of constraints (Section 2.2), opportunities (Section 2.3) and potential gaps in joint working (Section **Error! Reference source not found.**) identified.

The objectives and outputs related to surface water quality and flood risk from the DWMP were compared against those from equivalent information from the local authority. The following sub-sections highlight evidence gaps and constraints, opportunities and gaps in joint working.

2.2 Constraints identified

This **information review** highlighted the following **evidence gaps and constraints** that affect the alignment of local authority and WaSC management plans:

2.2.1 Evidence and information constraints

- **Local authority information provides valuable insight into risk and priorities, but may not reflect the most up-to-date position.** Local authority priorities evolve over time, but their strategic documents are not always updated regularly, which may mean they no longer accurately reflect current priorities. In the regional case study, the LFRMS and SWMP reviewed were a decade old. However, in the region 43 Section 19 flood investigation reports have been produced since 2016, indicating a substantial body of more recent flood evidence. No published spatial dataset exists showing the locations of these reports, limiting their usefulness for identifying flood hotspots and accurately defining WNC's priority areas. As an initial step, the available information was converted into a usable spatial format to enable this analysis.
- **Local authority information may lack the detail required for proactive water management planning.** In the OxCam case study, the LFRMS (2016) was a high-level strategic document that aligned broadly with DWMP objectives but lacked the specificity needed to inform proactive or targeted planning decisions.
- **There was no combined dataset to identify areas of shared priority.** Combined datasets, for example flooding hotspots across different flood mechanisms, would help illustrate spatial overlap in risk and responsibility and support better coordination. In the OxCam case study, no shared dataset of flooding hotspots was available across AWS and local authorities, limiting opportunities for joint prioritisation.

Following the **project partner interviews**, the following **key blockers to alignment** between WaSCs and local authorities were identified:

2.2.2 Organisational and delivery constraints

- **Resource and capacity constraints:** Local authorities face significant capacity pressures due to competing statutory duties and fragmented funding streams, limiting their ability to coordinate effectively with WaSCs. Challenges relate to funding availability, project management capacity, staffing and stakeholder engagement. In the OxCam case study, unclear legal responsibilities for surface water management were also cited as a barrier to securing sustained resourcing.
- **Differences in priorities and priority locations:** Partners can find it difficult to understand each other's priorities, particularly given the scale at which WaSCs operate across multiple local authorities. Perceptions of inflexible priorities were noted at an operational level within the WaSC, with clearer opportunities for local authorities to influence at a strategic level. Priority areas are often recorded separately by each organisation, and no combined dataset exists to confirm where priorities do or do not overlap, reinforcing uncertainty and misalignment.
- **Data availability, quality and sharing:** Keeping data up to date and sharing it between partners remains challenging. In the OxCam case study, no up-to-date spatial dataset of surface water flood risk priorities existed across West Northamptonshire. More widely, this may be reflective of a wider issue across many local authorities. Variability in how priorities are identified (proactive methodologies versus reactive responses) and uncertainty around model validation and confidence were also highlighted.

- **Communication and clarity of responsibility:** Effective communication can be hindered where key contacts are unclear, particularly in large organisations with staff turnover. Ambiguity around whether issues relate to surface water or drainage - and therefore whose responsibility the water is - further complicates coordination. This reflects a wider organisational and legislative framing that separates surface water and drainage responsibilities, despite the hydrological continuity between them. As a result, interventions delivered under one organisation's remit (e.g. a local authority) may reduce impacts elsewhere that fall under a WaSC responsibility, and vice versa, but this interdependence is not consistently recognised in planning or decision-making. This lack of clarity is not resolved in legislation and has prompted calls for a clearer narrative from industry, government and regulators. Complex organisational structures also make it difficult to identify appropriate points of contact across organisations.
- **Misalignment of organisational and funding cycles:** Local authorities typically operate on annual budgets, while WaSCs plan investment over five-year cycles, creating challenges for coordinated commitment and delivery. In the OxCam case study, AWS noted that although projects are planned within five-year cycles, not all schemes are defined at the outset. Clearer differentiation between indicative pipeline projects and committed schemes would support joint planning. AWS also highlighted the challenge of managing relationships across a large operational area alongside regulatory requirements, which can create a perceived disconnect between strategic intent and decisions made at operational levels.

Taken together, the evidence review and partner interviews highlight four core gaps in joint working between WaSCs and local authorities:

- **Clarity on roles and responsibilities and strategic points of contact.** Where contacts were known, joint working was positive; where they were not, communication was challenging. This points to the need for clearer organisational visibility (particularly within AWS) and a regular forum for strategic-level coordination, which the emerging AWS partnership working team could help facilitate.
- **A suitable forum to share data and identify shared priority areas.** While there is willingness on both sides to collaborate, mechanisms to share data at the right level and with the right people are not consistently in place. This limits awareness of potentially valuable datasets (e.g. WaSC priority areas and flooding hotspots) that could inform local authority planning.
- **Format and focus of existing joint meetings.** Multi-Agency Groups (MAGs) that AWS are involved with were seen as a positive step towards alignment, but questions remain around whether their structure, attendees and agenda are appropriate for aligning strategic water management, rather than focusing primarily on operational issues.
- **Alignment of surface water management plans (e.g. SWMPs and DWMPs):** Local authority plans are not always regularly updated, may lack sufficient detail for proactive planning, and are rarely supported by combined datasets. This makes it difficult to understand spatial overlap in risk, responsibility and opportunity for joint action.

2.3 Opportunities identified

This review highlighted the following opportunities for aligning local authority and WaSC management plans:

- **SWMP and DWMP objectives are often compatible.** In the OxCam case study, generally the objectives of the SWMP were to better understand flood mechanisms in areas identified as being flood hotspots, and to develop potential options for mitigating flooding in problem areas. In the DWMP there were objectives that related to both flooding and pollution arising from the sewerage network and one objective specifically referenced green infrastructure. While not necessarily directly aligned, it seemed that the objectives of the two plans were compatible.
- **The types of spatial outputs produced by both the SWMP and DWMP relate to areas of prioritisation and flood hotspots. Such information, if current, would be a useful tool in identifying areas of shared priority.** In the OxCam case study, the SWMP contained information

that could be extremely useful for understanding flood risk and planning prioritisation if it used current data, such as flood hotspots and flooding mechanisms based on results from hydraulic modelling. This was the type of data and information that would be useful if collated and summarised in a digestible format and then sifted through by local authority experts with first-hand knowledge of the study areas. It had utility in identifying areas of shared priority between organisations, however it was noted that the data in this example was eight years old and priorities may have changed.

- **Multi-benefits of integrating surface water and drainage management planning:** Aligning surface water and drainage planning across partners enables the identification of shared issues and priority areas, supporting the development of interventions that deliver multiple benefits rather than addressing challenges in isolation. For example, joint analysis may identify that surface water flooding is linked to limited sewer capacity. In such cases, upstream SuDS interventions can intercept, attenuate and/or infiltrate surface water, reducing peak flows entering the sewer network. This can help alleviate flood risk while also increasing available network capacity, reducing pressure on treatment assets, and minimising environmental impacts such as combined sewer overflows and polluted runoff. In doing so, integrated interventions can contribute to both surface water management objectives and DWMP performance outcomes.

Following the project partner interviews as part of the OxCam case study, the following factors were identified as being potential enablers for alignment between WaSCs and local authorities:

- **Resources and capacity constraints:** Positive outcomes were seen when local authorities had protected resources, for example contingent upon funded projects such as Resilience and Innovation Northants (RAIN)¹³ in WNC and ResilienTogether¹⁴ in Central Bedfordshire Council (CBC). AWS recognised that local delivery partners bring valuable expertise and confidence. They also highlighted the need to share lessons learned on Nature-based Solutions across local authorities and water sewerage companies
- **Differences in priorities and priority locations:** Although perspectives varied on how well AWS understood local authority priorities, it was expected that the new Partnerships Team should produce a more consistent experience of AWS, making strategic engagement more straightforward. It was noted that stakeholder engagement in DWMP Cycle 2 offers an opportunity to strengthen mutual understanding of priorities. While some felt that AWS have fixed priorities that can't be influenced by external input, it was noted that while this may be the case at an operational level, over strategic timeframes there is opportunity for local authorities and other organisations to feed into the DWMP Cycle 2 to influence the prioritisation of investment and highlight areas for partnership opportunities. It was noted that while high-level priorities are set for the Price Review submission, there are also funding opportunities available for partnership interventions.
- **Data availability, quality and sharing:** Surface water flooding is an emerging performance indicator for DWMP Cycle 2 and presents a key opportunity to strengthen partnership working across stakeholders. The DWMP provides a framework to collaboratively define and develop datasets, alongside tools or modelling approaches that support joint prioritisation of flooding risks from multiple sources. AWS currently holds datasets for the areas within its responsibility, including known issues, and will continue to manage these strategically through the DWMP to meet long-term objectives. It was noted that they are willing to share data to produce new datasets as part of the DWMP collaborative options development.
- **Communication and clarity of responsibility:** Where there have been spaces or forums dedicated to communicating about strategic priorities, the outcomes have generally been positive. There are examples where flooding came from multiple sources and joint solutions between organisations reduced flooding for more properties than if each organisation had acted alone.

¹³ RAIN – Resilience and Innovation Northants (n.d.) *Home Page – RAIN*. Available at: <https://rainnorthants.co.uk/> (Accessed March 2026)

¹⁴ ResilienTogether (n.d.) *Home – ResilienTogether*. Available at: <https://resilientogether.org.uk/> (Accessed March 2026)

- **Misalignment of organisational and funding cycles:** It was suggested that Infrastructure Delivery Plans (IDPs) could be a good resource to combine efforts, but practical challenges such as who/how they could be updated and kept relevant are present. A question raised was whether a joint planning and development resource could be explored, for example a WaSC resource seconded to a LA. AWS is a large organisation, which can make relationship management challenging alongside meeting regulatory requirements. They noted that although they participate in multi-agency groups (MAGs), these are typically small, focused, and operational rather than strategic in nature.

2.4 Summary

The findings emphasise the importance of a collaborative approach in managing water resources effectively. It highlights the necessity for clear communication, data sharing, and alignment of objectives among all stakeholders involved in water management in the region. This has helped to identify an emerging narrative of best practice activities that should inform the design of any future joint planning approach:

- **Shared understanding of place and risk** – Collate and share datasets to build a common understanding of vulnerability areas, opportunity areas, and overlapping areas of interest.
- **Mutual understanding between organisations** – Improve awareness of each organisation’s responsibilities, challenges, and ways of working (e.g. WaSCs and local authorities learning from each other).
- **Structured partnership working** – Establish partnership initiatives that maintain regular communication across multiple organisational levels, supported by defined roles and responsibilities.
- **Delivery mechanisms** – Strengthen understanding of the mechanisms and pathways through which joint projects can be implemented and funded.

These findings formed the foundation for project phase 2 (Section 3), which focuses on developing approaches for collaborative planning that can be applied across varying contexts, levels of maturity, and organisational capacities.

3. Potential approaches to joint planning

Project phase 2 focussed on reviewing existing approaches for joint planning and moving towards developing an approach that could be applied across varying contexts, levels of maturity and organisation capacities. Sections 3.1 to 3.3 summarise the findings, the detailed report is contained within Appendix A.2. Project phase 2 built directly on the outcomes of project phase 1 (Section 2), which aimed to establish a baseline understanding of existing relationships, opportunities and constraints associated with integrating surface water and drainage management planning between WaSCs and local authorities.

3.1 Approach development

When developing an approach to joint planning, it was important to consider multiple perspectives and sources of information. This included:

- examining **case studies** of existing approaches that have successfully delivered interventions,
- appraising **relevant guidance and previous approaches**, and
- exploring **other potential approaches** that could be applied in the future.

It is equally important to recognise that organisations vary in context, capacity, and maturity, and that there may be **no single approach that fits all situations**. Flexibility is therefore a key principle when designing joint planning processes.

Taken together, these considerations provided a foundation for deciding how best to proceed. The following sections outline how these key elements have shaped thinking, reduced duplication of effort, and provided a structured basis for developing a relevant and flexible approach.

3.1.1 Relevant case studies

It was important to identify relevant examples of projects or initiatives and distil learnings when developing approaches for place-based planning. Two important examples, Mansfield Sustainable Flood Resilience and Blue Green Newcastle, are outlined below. These examples have been used to help develop and guide the thinking around the joint planning approach.

- **Mansfield Sustainable Flood Resilience:** The Mansfield Sustainable Flood Resilience project, led by Severn Trent Water (STW), delivered more than 300 nature-based sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) interventions to reduce flood risk and combined sewer overflows. STW partnerships with the district and county councils, and private businesses enabled access to land, senior leadership support, and construction of SuDS features across the town. The main advantage of this partnership was having a clear lead funder (STW) driving rapid delivery, though this also meant the key drivers of that Partner being the primary focus of the project and other multiple benefits of a place-based approach become more secondary.
- **Blue Green Newcastle** – Blue-Green Newcastle is a city-centre flood resilience project delivered through the Northumbrian Integrated Drainage Partnership (NIDP). The NIDP brings together 13 LLFAs, the Environment Agency, Northumbrian Water, landowners, and local stakeholders. Blue-Green Newcastle is being led by Newcastle City Council uses SuDS and nature-based solutions (NbS) to reduce flood risk while improving public spaces, biodiversity, and climate resilience and brings together the Environment Agency, Northumbrian Water, landowners, and local stakeholders. This broad partnership intends to attract multiple funding sources and deliver wider benefits, however building consensus and firming up the funding across many partners can lengthen delivery times.

3.1.2 Relevant collaborative workflows

To avoid duplicating work and to build on existing learning, the project team reviewed previous relevant studies.

A key relevant study is the 2016 UKWIR report, *‘How best to align the funding processes with the various bodies involved in resolving flooding’*¹⁵ (published 2020), which explored how flood management organisations can better align planning and funding. It set out guiding principles and a collaborative workflow designed to integrate into existing planning processes, funding cycles, and typical project life cycles.

Although the report covered all flooding mechanisms, wider than this project’s focus on surface water, many of its recommendations and case studies were applicable or could be adapted. Moreover, while much has been updated since the publication of that report, the structure remained relevant. As such, the UKWIR report was an important resource that was built upon for shaping the joint planning approach developed in this project. Further detail can be found in Section 4.2 in Appendix A.2.

3.1.3 Other potential approaches for joint planning

The meaning of what an ‘approach’ is, is not a clearly definable. This section explores different ways to frame how an ‘approach’ could look, by providing some theoretical examples. Examples of such approaches have been illustrated with case studies and example activities. This has been drawn out of the research conducted during project phase 2 and is further detailed within Appendix A.2.

Traditional governance, funding and delivery models were not designed to support the multi-benefit, place-based outcomes across multiple organisations now required. Therefore, this project explored a range of alternative approaches spanning governance models, digital integration, and community partnership to identify how collaboration could be strengthened, duplication reduced, and collective outcomes achieved more effectively:

¹⁵ Cotton, A., Gill, E., Hardwick, S., Mallows, A. and Yeowell, A. (2016) *How best to align the funding processes with the various bodies involved in resolving flooding*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/603603cbd3bf7f0ab6856b59/_SC150010_report.pdf (Accessed October 2025)

- Collaborative governance and funding models:** This focuses on aligning strategic objectives, funding mechanisms and investment plans across organisations such as WaSCs, local authorities, and the Environment Agency. It seeks to move from project-specific collaboration toward shared investment planning, where partners co-fund interventions that deliver multiple outcomes. This aligns directly with DWMPs and LFRMSs by providing a structure to co-invest in nature-based, multi-benefit solutions. Examples of activities include partnership agreements or Memorandums of Understanding, blended finance models and adaptive management cycles. The goal is to move from single-project collaboration to shared long-term planning. Potential enablers can include shared outcome frameworks, integrated appraisal methods, flexible funding mechanisms, and long-term partnership governance. The case study *Water for Life (Southern Water)*¹⁶ demonstrates innovative finance models that spread costs and benefits over the lifetime of assets, aiming for cost-neutral projects that remain attractive to local authorities while reducing reliance on traditional “grey” infrastructure.
- Community partnership and co-design approaches:** This focuses on emphasising the importance of engaging communities early and meaningfully in the planning and adoption of surface water interventions. This builds local ownership, enhances long-term stewardship, and ensures that the benefits of SuDS and blue-green infrastructure are felt locally. Examples include community-led initiatives and collaborative design workshops bringing together technical specialists, planners, and communities to co-develop multi-benefit interventions. Potential enablers can include co-design, citizen science, community skills programmes, social enterprise models for maintenance, and local governance pilots. This embeds the ‘place-based’ principle - ensuring solutions reflect the lived experience of flooding and are sustained through local empowerment. The case study *SuDS+ (Stanley, County Durham)*¹⁷ combines SuDS delivery with social regeneration goals, linking local aspirations for jobs, social amenity value, and environmental quality with practical water management.
- Digital integration and infrastructure coordination:** Digital platforms, shared datasets, and mapping tools can support collaboration by providing a single view of opportunities and constraints. They help identify co-delivery opportunities, synchronise infrastructure programmes, and reduce duplication and disruption. Examples include alignment of utilities with local authorities during scheduling and delivery of street works upgrades and incentivising SuDS installation through development of NbS and SuDS markets. Potential enablers can include shared data standards, interoperability between platforms (e.g. DWMP digital twins and local authority GIS), and transparent programme planning. This supports the alignment between DWMPs, Local Plans, and capital investment programmes, unlocking more efficient and joined-up delivery. The case study *SuDS and Streetworks Market (Greater London Authority)*¹⁸ integrates infrastructure mapping and scheduling to coordinate SuDS delivery with planned utility works.
- Organisational integration and knowledge exchange:** Sustained collaboration requires people, not just systems. This approach focuses on breaking down organisational silos through shared learning, embedded roles, and secondments. By placing staff from one organisation within another - for example, a water company secondee supporting a local authority drainage team - mutual understanding of priorities, funding cycles, and technical approaches can be strengthened. Examples include secondments, job-shadowing, joint training programmes, professional networks, shared project offices and integrated catchment planning teams. Potential enablers include partnership frameworks, data sharing agreements, open standards, integrated datasets, joint competency and resilience standards, and leadership support for cross-organisational working. This can build capacity for collaborative delivery, ensuring that partnership learning endures beyond individual projects or

¹⁶ Southern Water (n.d.) *Water for Life – Hampshire*. Available at: <https://www.southernwater.co.uk/about-us/our-plans/water-for-life-hampshire/> (Accessed March 2026)

¹⁷ Stanley SuDS+ Project (n.d.) *SuDS+ Community-Led Futures*. Available at: <https://stanleysuds.co.uk/> (Accessed March 2026)

¹⁸ Thames Water (n.d.) *SuDS through street works*. Available at: <https://www.thameswater.co.uk/about-us/innovation/suds-through-street-works> (Accessed March 2026)

funding rounds. Supports early identification of collaborative opportunities. In the case study *Water for Life (Southern Water)*¹⁶, the Highway SuDS programme is providing full-time resource to local authorities.

3.2 Approach development reflections

The review of existing and potential approaches to joint planning outlined the range of possible approaches. Given the almost limitless variety of potential methods and ways of categorising them, this project's research concluded that rather than creating new approaches or prescribing specific ones, it is more effective to establish a **structured workflow** that can incorporate existing best practice, draw on prior work, and reference relevant case studies to support with practical implementation.

Organisations may approach collaboration from different starting points, reflecting variations in responsibilities, objectives, challenges, resources, and spatial focus. A successful joint planning approach must therefore be **flexible and scalable** - capable of accommodating multiple entry points and operating across different spatial and organisational scales, while providing a coherent structure that supports alignment and integration over time.

Collaboration exists with a **range of relationship maturity**, from early coordination to well-established, integrated partnerships with shared delivery mechanisms. It should therefore enable a range of engagement levels, with appropriate tools and methods applied according to the maturity, capacity, and needs of the partnership.

3.2.1 Optimal timing for aligning DWMPs and local authority spatial planning

Within a partnership context, the earlier that overlaps and shared interests between DWMPs and local authority surface water management planning are identified, the greater the opportunity for alignment and mutual benefit. Within the developed approach (outlined in Section 4), users are encouraged to identify high-level overlaps between their own and partner organisations' policies during the initial stage, and to revisit these in greater detail at Stage 4 (see Section 4.5).

In practice, however, projects and collaborative processes are rarely linear or synchronised. If organisations wait for an ideal project phase or alignment point before engaging, opportunities for collaboration may be delayed or missed entirely. As reflected in the proverb, "the best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago; the second-best time is today", the absence of perfect timing should not prevent the initiation of cooperation.

DWMPs and local authority surface water planning both involved iterative processes and therefore the landscape will continue to evolve over time. Early engagement between partners can therefore help to shape and improve future planning cycles. While alignment opportunities may not always be realised within a given project, ongoing collaboration can enhance preparedness for subsequent initiatives, leading to progressively stronger alignment over time.

For this reason, as described in Sections 3.2 and 4.5, the approach has been designed to be flexible and scalable, recognising variations in organisational responsibilities, objectives, challenges, available resources, and spatial focus.

3.3 Towards a Collaborative Approach to joint planning of multi-benefits interventions

3.3.1 Overview of process

- 1. Initial development of the Collaborative Approach:** This was guided by and builds on previous research, examples and case studies outlined in Sections 3.1 to 3.2.
- 2. Trialling of the Collaborative Approach:** It was trialled in a location within the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor to gather insights on its utility and identify lessons to be learn. This informed the next iteration of the Collaborative Approach.
- 3. Assurance of the Collaborative Approach:**

- a. **Feedback from the EA:** This was incorporated to further refine and strengthen the Collaborative Approach.
- b. **Feedback from workshops with project partners:** Workshops were held with key partners in the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor to gather feedback and further refine the Collaborative Approach, with insights informing the final version.

3.3.2 Initial development of the Collaborative Approach

The development of the Collaborative Approach was informed by previous research, and structured to include best practice activities, signpost towards relevant prior work and case studies, as outlined in Sections 3.1 and 3.2. Findings from initial project phases were used to shape the development of the Collaborative Approach.

The Collaborative Approach is not intended to replace existing processes or add additional requirements, but to highlight the opportunities within current approaches for collaboration and joint working. It is not aiming to describe or alter the normal design process steps of a project but to work alongside typical project lifecycles

Previous studies have proposed collaborative workflows that highlight how collaboration can be integrated into existing project and funding cycles. The UKWIR report (published 2020) described in Section 3.1.2 has been used as an initial basis for the development and design of this joint planning Collaborative Approach.

A **ten-stage collaborative workflow** was developed, designed to fit alongside typical project life cycles and typical funding steps. It is designed to be flexible and scalable, recognising the varying levels of partner maturity, aiming to ensure its relevance across different organisations and contexts. An overview of the Collaborative Approach to joint planning is detailed in Section 4.

3.3.3 Trailing of the Collaborative Approach

Project Phase 3 focussed on trialling the Collaborative Approach developed in Project Phase 2 and highlighting any learnings that emerged. This trial led the project team part-way through to stage 5 of the Collaborative Approach. Due to the constraints of the time-limited project, it was not possible to run through the additional stages. The trial and lessons learned are detailed in Appendix A.3 and summarised in Section 4.6.

3.3.4 Feedback from the Environment Agency

Feedback received from the EA was incorporated to further refine and strengthen the Collaborative Approach. A summary of this feedback is located within Section 5.1.1. Themes included improving the clarity of the Collaborative Approach content, improving the clarity of the Collaborative Approach layout and including additional detail.

3.3.5 Workshops with project partners

After the test and trial, two workshops were held with project partners to gather feedback on the Collaborative Approach. Workshop themes included data sharing, technical integration, stakeholder engagement and collaboration. This feedback was processed and was used to refine the Collaborative Approach. A summary of the feedback from the workshop and actions taken is located within Section 5.1.2. Detailed workshop feedback is located within Appendix A.4.

4. A Collaborative Approach to delivery of multi-partner interventions

4.1 Overview

The joint planning Collaborative Approach comprises ten stages, which are detailed in the simplified ‘executive summary view’ of the Collaborative Approach in Figure 4-1. The full, detailed Collaborative Approach is presented within a user-friendly, interactive PDF that allows users to explore the Collaborative Approach and reveal further information as needed¹⁹.

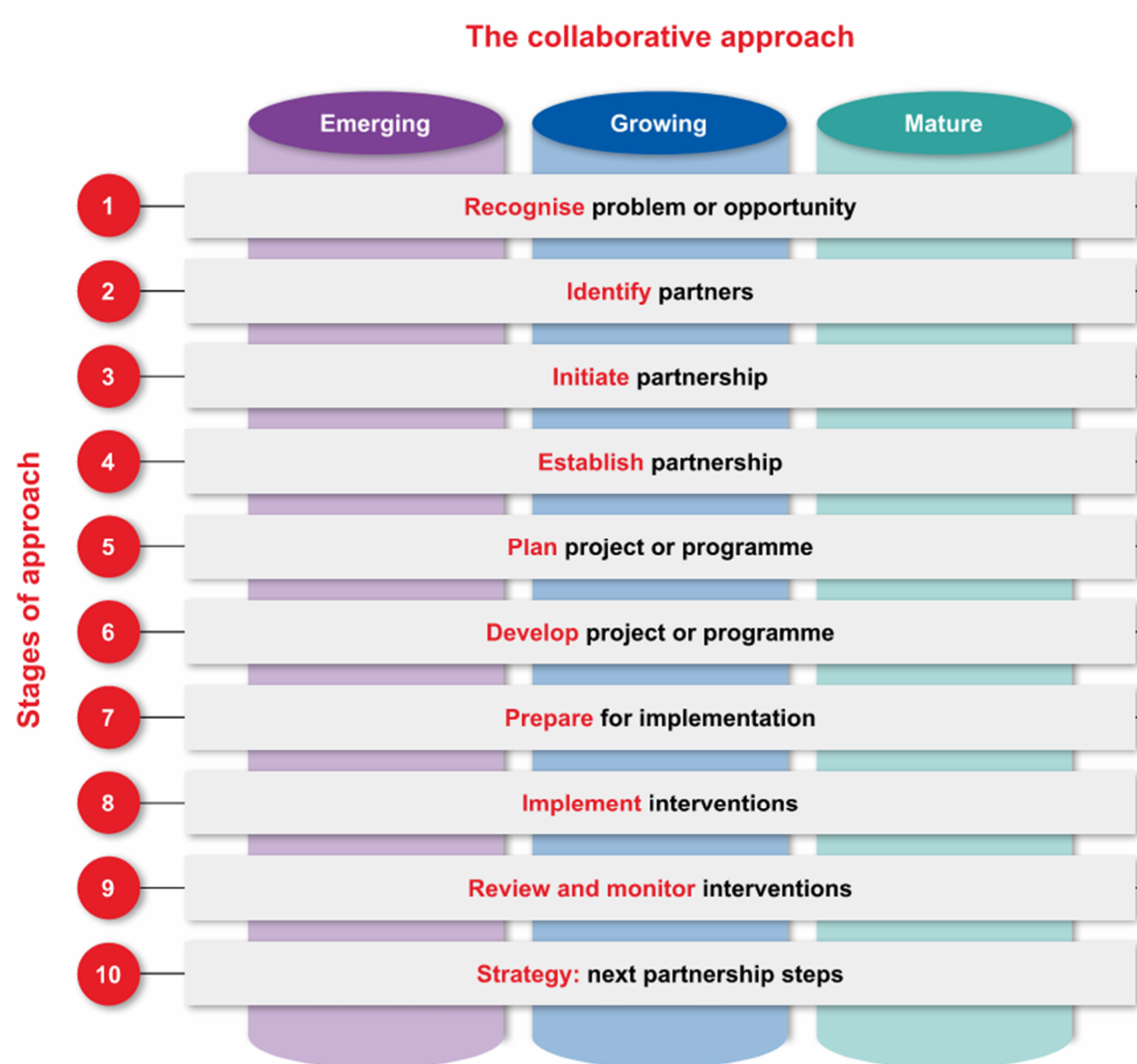


Figure 4-1: Executive summary view of the Collaborative Approach¹⁹

The ten-stage Collaborative Approach is designed to align with typical project life cycles and funding processes. It covers the typical full spectrum of collaboration processes that organisations should consider

¹⁹ Environment Agency (2026) A place-based collaborative approach for partnership working. Rev 01 – April 2026

when working together, from identifying existing problems or opportunities to conducting post-implementation reviews, monitoring progress, and planning a programme of works. A breakdown of the ten stages, with further information, is detailed within Appendix A.2, Section 5.6. At each stage, the Collaborative Approach provides prompts and suggested actions to help guide users through the journey. These have been informed by the research conducted within project phases 1 and 2 (outlined in Section 2 and 3 of this report and detailed in Appendices A.1 and A.2).

Research conducted in project phases 1 and 2 (summarised in Sections 3.1 and 3.2) indicated that organisations may approach collaboration from different starting points, reflecting variations in responsibilities, objectives, resources and spatial focus. Therefore, a successful joint planning process must be flexible and scalable, capable of accommodating multiple entry points and operating across different spatial and organisational scales.

As such, a key element of this Collaborative Approach is the inclusion of three maturity options within the ten stages ('Emerging', 'Growing' and 'Mature'), aiming to ensure its relevance across different organisations and contexts. The three maturity pathways are detailed in Section 4.3 of this report and Appendix A.2, Section 5.3.

Another key element of this Collaborative Approach is that it can be applied at different scales, from local project issues to large strategic programmes. All pathways begin with securing senior level support. From there, the 'Emerging' pathway focuses more on tactical steps to build new relationships, while the 'Growing' and 'Mature' pathways support more strategic, programme-level collaboration, where partnerships are more established.

4.2 Features and benefits

- A ten-stage workflow that is intended to be **clear, intuitive and flexible**, providing a structured way for partners to work through the Collaborative Approach while recognising that real-world application may not always be linear.
- The Collaborative Approach **supports the integration of DWMPs and local authority surface water planning** by helping partners to identify shared priorities, align evidence and coordinate planning processes. This can lead to more coherent and efficient plan-making, reducing duplication of effort and enabling more joined-up, place-based outcomes.
- The Collaborative Approach places people first, with the intention of embedding behaviours, relationships and **partnership working throughout each stage**, recognising that effective collaboration underpins successful outcomes.
- The Collaborative Approach is **informed by proven practice**, with further detail, tools and case studies provided in the 'Links to further information' section.
- At each stage, the Collaborative Approach provides **prompts and suggested actions** to help guide users through the journey. Outputs and outcomes may vary depending on context, scale and the maturity of the partnership.
- Encourages **early identification of partner/stakeholders** and who should be present at each stage of the Collaborative Approach, helping to keep the discussion focused, avoid duplication and save time.
- **Three maturity pathways** ('strands' or 'routes') are included to reflect that partnerships begin from different starting points and may progress differently. Each maturity pathway (detailed in Section 4.3 below) sets out different recommended activities across the ten stages. The Collaborative Approach is designed to be flexible to enable organisations at various partnership maturities to advance their projects without imposing rigid requirements.
- Designed for adaptability, the Collaborative Approach allows clear progression through stages as well as **allowing movement between maturity routes** when necessary as relationships evolve or circumstances change during a project. For example, a prospective partnership could pick up the

flowchart and decide to follow the ‘Mature’ route, but at a later stage decided that the ‘Growing’ route is more appropriate.

- It is intended that the Collaborative Approach can be **applied at different scales**, from addressing local, project-level issues to supporting more strategic/large programme objectives. All maturity pathways begin with a recommendation for senior leader buy-in. From this point the ‘Emerging’ pathway may place greater emphasis on more tactical or operational activity to help establish relationships, while the ‘Growing’ and ‘Mature’ pathways may help a more strategic/large programme focus where relationships are already more established.
- The Collaborative Approach is **adaptable** by design and is intended to be shaped to suit local context, including culture, governance arrangements, geography and capacity for partnership working.

4.3 Users and user profiles

The core user groups for this Collaborative Approach are likely to include Local Authorities (e.g. flood and environment team), WaSCs (e.g. DWMP team and more tactical/operation team leads), and the Environment Agency (e.g. water and environment team leads). Other users of this Collaborative Approach may include, Combined Authorities, Internal Drainage Boards, Non-departmental Public Bodies (e.g. Network Rail or National Highways), environmental non-governmental organisations eNGOs (e.g. Rivers and Wildlife Trusts), businesses, developers and other beneficiaries and Catchment Partnerships.

As noted in the above sections, a key element of this Collaborative Approach is the inclusion of three maturity options within the ten stages (Emerging, Growing and Mature), aiming to ensure its relevance across different organisations and contexts. At the start of the Collaborative Approach, users are directed to maturity descriptions for each pathway to enable them to identify the level of maturity of the existing relationship with a collaboration partner. This helps users to determine a starting position and select the most appropriate route through the workflow. It is also noted that the maturity pathway may change as the project progresses, allowing users to move between pathways depending on how the relationship develops.

An overview of what each maturity stage represents is displayed below:

- **Emerging:** You may not yet know which organisations in your area to partner with or have established relationships with them. You are willing to collaborate but may be unsure what practical steps to take and may lack the time or capacity to work this out. You understand your own organisation’s objectives and challenges, and while you have some data, you would like to improve it. You may also lack awareness of partner organisations’ priorities, data, challenges, and strategic aims, and recognise the need to build trust and develop a stronger relationship. **You may choose to focus on developing one project, to build relationships, trust and confidence.**
- **Growing:** You may have established relationships with partner organisations and collaborate effectively at an operational level but not yet have a strategic partnership. As a result, you may lack a clear understanding of your partners’ priorities, objectives, and areas of overlap with your own. Data may be shared informally, without formal agreements in place. You may also be motivated to improve how you work together but feel unsure about how to make changes and already be stretched by other responsibilities, limiting the time and capacity available to explore new ways of working. **You may choose to focus on developing several projects, to grow the partnership and consolidate relationships.**
- **Mature:** You may have clear knowledge of partner organisations and strong existing personal relationships. You may have a formalised partnership working arrangement with regular meetings taking place at different levels between organisations (e.g. operational and strategic). You already have a clear view conceptually and spatially of where there is alignment of between organisational objectives and priorities. You share data freely and have sharing agreements in place. There is a high level of mutual trust. However, you might find it challenging to collaboratively fund and maintain and have challenges relating to governance and ownership. **You may choose to establish and grow a programme of projects, and put mechanisms in place to steward the partnership.**

4.4 Funding, governance, roles and responsibilities

The Collaborative Approach is designed to encourage early and ongoing consideration of funding, governance, roles and responsibilities as part of collaborative planning. At Stage 3 of the Collaborative Approach (‘Introductory workshops’), partners are prompted to explore, at a high level, the balance of responsibility for the identified problem or opportunity, and how this may translate into funding contributions and delivery roles. This is followed by a more detailed discussion at Stage 5, where partners are encouraged to agree governance arrangements, funding approaches and responsibilities for delivery and long-term management.

Project phase 3 reporting (see Appendix A.3) included a high-level review of available literature and case studies relating to funding and governance, including insights from the EWSC programme²⁰. This highlighted that, while a wide range of funding and financing mechanisms exist, no single model is currently both scalable and market-ready in the UK context. Instead, delivery is likely to require blended or hybrid funding approaches, supported by clear governance arrangements and alignment between partners. Given the time-limited nature of this project, this review was not comprehensive, and further work would be beneficial to explore these mechanisms in more detail and in specific local contexts.

A consistent finding across both this project and the earlier EWSC work is that funding challenges are closely linked to governance and coordination. In particular:

- Environmental and water management benefits are often shared across multiple organisations, but existing funding mechanisms are not always configured to reflect this.
- There is a need to better identify beneficiaries, quantify value (including avoided costs), and establish mechanisms to share costs and benefits between partners.
- Long-term stewardship, operation and maintenance of interventions is often less clearly defined than initial capital delivery, and requires early consideration of ownership and management models.

In practice, the selection of interventions, along with their governance and funding arrangements, is influenced not only by technical suitability but also by organisational priorities, available resources, risk appetite and the distribution of benefits. As such, the Collaborative Approach emphasises the importance of early dialogue between partners to establish shared understanding and to identify feasible delivery models.

Further detail on funding and governance mechanisms can be found in the EWSC funding and finance roadmap and related guidance²⁰, which provide a useful starting point for partners seeking to develop place-based funding models and business cases.

4.5 Integration of plans and solutions

The Collaborative Approach provides a structured way for partners to integrate surface water and drainage planning across organisations, supporting more coordinated, place-based outcomes. It can be applied at a range of scales, from addressing local project-level issues to informing strategic or programme-level planning, as outlined in Section 4.2.

A core principle of the Collaborative Approach is the alignment of spatial planning across organisations. At Stage 1, users are encouraged to define the problem or opportunity and identify key drivers, alongside prompts to consider which plans and policies (including DWMPs, SWMPs and LFRMS) are relevant and where overlaps may exist. While the ‘Emerging’ maturity pathway may be driven by a specific issue, users are encouraged to consider the wider planning context to identify opportunities for alignment.

For ‘Growing’ and ‘Mature’ partnerships, Stage 4 includes dedicated workshops to review and align DWMP and SWMP (or equivalent) priorities, scales and evidence bases. These activities are supported by prompts to:

²⁰ Enabling Water Smart Communities (2025) Review of funding and finance landscape for nature and environment improvements. Final report (issued 4th March 2025)

- identify shared drivers and objectives
- overlay spatial datasets (e.g. hydraulic modelling outputs, development plans, flood mechanisms, pollution incidents)
- agree priority areas for intervention

This reflects the principle that integrated planning is a prerequisite for integrated delivery and investment. Insights from the EWSC programme further reinforce that fragmented planning often leads to fragmented funding and missed opportunities for co-investment. By contrast, aligning plans and priorities at an early stage enables partners to identify shared outcomes, develop joint business cases, and unlock more coordinated funding approaches.

From a WaSC perspective, this highlights the importance of understanding partner priorities during DWMP development. Similarly, for local authorities, early engagement with WaSCs and other stakeholders during the preparation of LFRMS, SWMPs or related studies can significantly improve alignment. In both cases, earlier engagement increases the likelihood of identifying shared priorities and developing integrated, multi-benefit solutions.

Overall, the Collaborative Approach supports a shift from parallel planning towards more coordinated and integrated delivery, providing a foundation for improved collaboration, more efficient plan-making, and better long-term outcomes.

4.6 Trialling of the Collaborative Approach

As noted in Section 3.3.3, project phase 3 focussed on trialling the Collaborative Approach and highlighting any learnings that emerged. The trial led the project team part-way through to stage 5 of the Collaborative Approach. Due to the constraints of the time-limited project, it was not possible to complete the additional stages.

The trialling process and lessons learned are detailed in Appendix A.3. Below is a summary of the key learning that emerged, this has informed the final version of the Collaborative Approach:

- **Partner priorities must be understood early in the project:** The selected intervention area was a high priority for the local authority but less of a priority for the WaSC. This identified three things:
 1. that the location selection exercise, undertaken using data available at the time, did not identify this; and
 2. that it would have been beneficial for individuals in each organisation with specific knowledge of the issues at the locations of interest had attended the location selection workshops held previously in the trial of the Collaborative Approach, so this could be picked up sooner.
 3. that the information provided by the data tables from the DWMP may suggest a type of option that is the preferred direction of travel in the future, but they do not necessarily reflect urgency at the operational level.

This highlighted the importance of having the right organisational representatives involved at each project phase as well as the importance of the availability of data. As a result, the Collaborative Approach was amended to reflect these learnings, with additional prompts added to the initial stages to ensure people involved are anchored in and have responsibilities within the place of interest (recognising different scales) and to consider the data available and if data sharing agreements will be needed. If possible, this would involve joint partner workshops, ensuring the meetings involve representatives from all partner organisations that can guide on the specific area(s). To address this, the project team added additional workshop(s) to Stage 5 of the Collaborative Approach, with each workshop having a clear purpose and desired outcome.

- **Data availability significantly shapes decisions:** It was observed that access to additional or different data, such as spatial data from DWMP or Water Industry National Environment Programme (WINEP) mapping, might have significantly impacted the selection process for both the selected intervention area and the scope of the Collaborative Approach by helping to identify potential overlaps more effectively. Subsequently the Collaborative Approach has been updated and

incorporates these learnings by adding an optional data-sharing workshop. This workshop is intended to clarify what data is required, agree on a data-sharing plan, and therefore reduce the likelihood of data limitations affecting decision making.

- **Maturity pathways were restructured:** The original approach assumed a common starting point from which the maturity pathways later diverged, which it was realised did not reflect differing levels of collaboration and differing circumstances at the outset. They were therefore revised to start at the outset of the Collaborative Approach, allowing organisations to engage from a position that better reflects their existing partnership maturity and circumstances.
- **Links to typical project phases were strengthened:** Making the Collaborative Approach easier to align with real-world project planning.
- **Third party leadership introduced artificiality into the trialling of the Collaborative Approach:** For this project Arup led the use of the Collaborative Approach in the trial. Arup being neither a water company nor local authority meant that there were some artificial elements in the trial that meant certain ways it was used might not have been tested as they would in practice. The Collaborative Approach should ideally be led by the local authority or water company.

5. Summary of feedback: assuring the Collaborative Approach

5.1.1 Feedback received from the Environment Agency

The Environment Agency provided feedback to improve the Collaborative Approach. The EA review focused on areas that weren't covered during the workshops, in addition to content that was. A brief summary of the feedback actioned at this stage is displayed below:

- **Improving the clarity of Collaborative Approach content:** For example, removing or amending detail in the Collaborative Approach to improve clarity and meaning, including definitions for certain terms/phrases e.g. 'place-based contractor procurement', assigning reference numbers from the main Collaborative Approach to the supporting information and case studies, and adding headings to information the boxes.
- **Improving the clarity of Collaborative Approach layout:** For example, moving the 'select level of maturity' and 'further information sections' to a clearer location.
- **Additional detail:** For example, including further explanation on why a list of plans is included in the 'Define drivers' section of the Collaborative Approach and clarifying how we expect users to apply this information, adding additional references to external reports and information, adding additional case studies and examples for partnership steering committees.

Some feedback could not be actioned at this stage due to resource constraints and it was agreed that it would be acknowledged in the reporting instead. This is summarised below:

- **Merging maturity pathways:** It was suggested that three maturity pathways could be merged into a single pathway in the later stages of the Collaborative Approach as the activities are considered sufficiently similar. This point was raised within the partner workshops and is further detailed below. Time constraints did not allow for major structural changes, but this work could be undertaken as part of future updates.
- **Create feedback loops within the Collaborative Approach:** To increase clarity that some stages may need to be revisited if new drivers emerge or existing ones change, for example following a flood event or when strategy is updated. This could be included in the Collaborative Approach as part of future updates.
- **Place greater emphasis on considering multiple locations for partnership work.** The strength of partnership working lies in the ability to coordinate and scale interventions across multiple locations.

It was suggested that the Collaborative Approach should make it clearer that partnership working may involve several project locations rather than just one, particularly within the ‘Growing’ and ‘Mature’ pathways.

5.1.2 Feedback received from project partner workshops

Two workshops were held with project partners to gather feedback to further refine the Collaborative Approach. Workshop themes included data sharing, technical integration, stakeholder engagement and collaboration. This feedback was then processed and analysed – the feedback was grouped by type and assigned a Red, Amber, Green rating:

A ‘Red’ rating denoted ‘actions the project team (collectively) don’t intend to take or do not see value in meeting the project objectives but should still be acknowledged in reporting’. An ‘Amber’ rating denoted ‘actions the project team (collectively) want to take but cannot fully deliver at this stage, so will need to be reflected within reporting’ and a ‘Green’ rating denoting ‘actions the project team (collectively) want to take and can deliver’.

In the summary below, bold text outlines the feedback received, while non-bold text explains the actions taken to address this feedback within the Collaborative Approach and any additional comments (Green-rated feedback) Detailed workshop feedback is located within Appendix A.4.

- **Funding timescales and programme constraints should be discussed earlier, as they shape what collaboration can be achieved:** Additional workshop prompts were added to encourage early discussion of funding, timescales and programme alignment. Stakeholder mapping was included as an optional prompt which may help to identify non-traditional funding partners.
- **It is unclear who should be involved when - stakeholder mapping is useful, but needs to be proportionate and not overly burdensome:** Stakeholder mapping was added as an optional prompt to the Collaborative Approach, allowing teams to scale effort up or down.
- **Data sharing is a major challenge (confidentiality, definitions, compatibility) – address as soon as practicable in the Collaborative Approach:** Early prompts have been added into the Collaborative Approach to discuss data needs and data-sharing agreements, plus optional data-sharing workshops signposting to further information and guidance.
- **Adding arrows to the Collaborative Approach to indicate sideways movement between maturity pathways:** The upfront information for the Collaborative Approach states that partners may move between maturity pathways as relationships develop and circumstances changes. Additional arrows have been added at the top of each stage to further clarify that movement between maturity pathways is possible.
- **The Collaborative Approach should support both local/tactical actions and strategic thinking, and allow movement between pathways:** Clarifying text was added to the ‘Introduction’ page to explain how the Collaborative Approach can be used to support different scales, from addressing local, project-level issues to supporting more strategic/large programme objectives. The “Start here” section was also updated to manage expectations, emphasise flexibility, pathway movement, and highlight that users can apply individual activities of the Collaborative Approach as stand-alone steps to complement any existing arrangements.
- **While the depth of detail is useful, the Collaborative Approach can feel complex or daunting, and it’s not always clear where information sits and how it is linked:** To address the concerns that the Collaborative Approach felt complex and overwhelming, it has been converted into an interactive PDF that allows users to view detail and further information gradually. Provisionally, the first page will show introductory text, the second page will present a simplified ‘Executive summary view’ of the Collaborative Approach, the third section will display the full Collaborative Approach with clickable links to additional information in sections 4 and 5. Signposting to information, structure and clarity have also been improved.

The summary text below outlines the Amber-rated feedback. Where time constrains meant that no changes could be made to the Collaborative Approach, the feedback has been instead reflected within the reporting.

These recommendations could be undertaken during future updates to further improve the Collaborative Approach.

- **Partners have varying capacity and availability:** Actions recommended include discussing partner capacity and resourcing constraints. For example, adding a prompt within ‘introductory workshops’ to discuss partner availability and resourcing throughout the intended project timeline. Partnership steering groups may help engage partners with limited capacity. While these are already included in the ‘Mature’ pathway, they could also be applied within the ‘Growing’ and ‘Emerging’ pathways.
- **Aligning partner funding and project timescales:** Actions recommended include sharing funding and project programmes in advance of collaboration meetings, helping partners understand the key priorities, funding availability and upcoming work of the other collaboration partners. A prompt to consider potential funding options is already included within the ‘Introductory workshop’ section of the Collaborative Approach, but an additional prompt to consider overlaying the funding and project programmes of partners could be included.
- **Additional case studies:** It was noted that the Collaborative Approach could be strengthened by including more information on other place-based initiatives within the case studies section.
- **Including ‘Milestones’:** Highlighting specific tasks as ‘Milestones’ that users could work through was identified as a useful enhancement to the Collaborative Approach. Example milestones include ‘Agree to proceed and establish a project or partnership steering group’ and ‘Compile and submit an outline business case’.
- **Merging the three maturity pathways:** It was suggested that three maturity pathways could be merged into a single pathway in the later stages of the Collaborative Approach, if the activities were considered sufficiently similar. It is felt doing so would improve clarity and usability. It would be possible to combine stages 7 to 10 of the Collaborative Approach, as the tasks and actions within these stages are similar.
- **Further clarity around who should be involved when:** It was suggested that the Collaborative Approach could more clearly indicate the stages at which strategic partners are required, and when the responsibility should transition to more local team. It could be helpful to define ‘handover points’, though it’s important not to make the Collaborative Approach overly prescriptive.

The summary text below outlines the Red-rated feedback, denoting actions the project team (collectively) agreed should not be taken, but that should be acknowledged in reporting for completeness.

- **SharePoint site or document with key contacts from different organisations:** While this is a good idea in theory, it was noted by some partners that it is difficult to keep updated in practice.
- **Re-structuring the Collaborative Approach to create a core central pathway:** It was suggested that a single core pathway could be created, with additional steps positioned on either side. For example, the ‘Mature’ pathway could be placed in the centre, with tasks associated with the ‘Emerging’ and ‘Growing’ pathways branching from it. This was the original structure of the Collaborative Approach, before it became three distinct strands, and the project team have reservations of reverting back to this structure as it they feel it would reduce clarity, rather than improve it.
- **The Collaborative Approach may assume a baseline level of skill/knowledge for its use (e.g GIS skills):** The basics of the Collaborative Approach are quite simple. It starts by identifying key stakeholders in an area, followed by extensive communication, identifying opportunities, developing a plan and ultimately delivery of a project. This Collaborative Approach is not intended for the general public or voluntary groups, as such even if certain skills are lacking, partners will still be able to collaborate and will have the ability to undertake works in some form. Tools such as GIS can significantly improve this process by bringing geographically based information together. However, even if organisations don’t have the capacity to use GIS tools for spatial data overlay or analysis, it is still possible to have discussions in meeting using google maps and the information they have to hand. Technology can make collaboration easier, but it shouldn’t hinder two organisations working together.

6. Learnings and recommendations

6.1 Reflections and ongoing challenges

The list below summarises the key ongoing challenges associated with implementing this Collaborative Approach across plans and highlights further refinements to the approach that would help address these challenges.

- **Partner capacity and resourcing constraints.** This has the potential to be an ongoing challenge as it can be challenging to plan resourcing and availability, especially for smaller stakeholders (e.g. local authorities). Local authorities have statutory obligations (e.g. Section 19 reports), which are hard to plan for and may take priority over collaborative working. However, it is worth noting that more can often be achieved if linking up with another organisation, but there may be an uncomfortable beginning. One organisation can carry on working when ‘emergencies’ take staff offline from the other. In addition, co-funding might mean that someone else can be employed to make the progress whilst the original team members can carry out their other roles. As outlined within Section 5.1.2, recommendations to improve the Collaborative Approach include adding prompts to discuss partner capacity and resourcing constraints early in the project and create partnership steering groups to help engage partners with limited capacity.
- **Aligning funding and project timescales:** As outlined within Section 5.1.2, recommendations to improve the Collaborative Approach include sharing funding and project programmes in advance of collaboration meetings, helping partners understand key priorities, funding availability and the upcoming work of other collaboration partners. It is worth noting that it can be useful to not just overlay data but also to overlay programmes and funding windows. The data-overlay method used in the trial of the Collaborative Approach to identify overlapping surface water priorities might have been different if different information was used, such as funding or programme timescales.
- **Further clarity around who should be involved when:** Making it clearer within the approach the point at which strategic thinking and strategy teams is needed and when to handover to local scale detail-focused delivery teams. It was suggested that the Collaborative Approach could more clearly indicate the stages at which strategic partners are required, and when the responsibility should transition to more local teams. Future updates could include defining ‘handover points’, though it’s important not to make the Collaborative Approach overly prescriptive.
- **Local authority documents don’t often present a current snapshot of risk and priorities as they are not updated regularly.** Local authority priorities evolve over time, but their strategic documents are not always updated regularly, which may mean they no longer accurately reflect current priorities and may not contain the detail required for planning. This is an ongoing challenge to aligning spatial planning. The Collaborative Approach aims to address this by including three maturity pathways to reflect that partnerships start from different starting points and may progress differently. The ‘Emerging’ maturity pathway may be primarily driven by a specific need or a problem, but it’s noted that it may be useful to also consider wider plans (e.g. SWMP and DWMP) in the context of that need or problem. The Emerging pathway encourages users to consider wider strategic plans and provides prompt on how to do so, but it is never necessary for progressing through the approach allowing users to still progress if plans do not overlap. The ‘Growing’ and ‘Mature’ pathways contain more specific activities and prompts to review DWMP and SWMP (or equivalent) alignment and agree on shared drivers, priorities and scales, before commencing with project or programme planning
- **Data availability, consistency and sharing:** Differences in data availability, formats, quality and accessibility between organisations can limit the ability to identify overlaps and develop shared evidence bases. Challenges around data ownership, licensing and governance may also restrict effective data sharing. Further refinement of the Collaborative Approach could include clearer guidance on establishing data-sharing agreements, minimum data requirements, and approaches to managing uncertainty or gaps in available information.

- **Uncertainty in benefits realisation and investment alignment:** While collaborative working can unlock greater value, it can be challenging to quantify and demonstrate shared benefits across organisations with different drivers, metrics and funding mechanisms. This can make it harder to justify joint investment or prioritise schemes. Enhancements to the Collaborative Approach could include prompts or tools to help articulate shared outcomes, define co-benefits, and support the development of joint business cases.
- **Maintaining momentum and engagement over time:** Collaboration often relies on sustained engagement from multiple partners, which can be difficult to maintain alongside competing priorities and changing personnel. There is a risk that early enthusiasm is not carried through to delivery. The Collaborative Approach could be strengthened by including prompts around governance, regular review points, and mechanisms for maintaining accountability and continuity.
- **Balancing flexibility with clarity:** While the flexibility of the Collaborative Approach is a key strength, some users may find it challenging to determine how best to apply it in practice without more prescriptive guidance. There is a risk of inconsistent application between partnerships, although this could also be framed as a strength of the approach provided that each application leads towards successful outcomes. Further refinement could include additional examples, worked case studies, or indicative “minimum steps” to support users while retaining flexibility.
- **Translating strategic alignment into delivery:** Even where alignment is achieved at a strategic level, translating this into coordinated delivery on the ground can be challenging due to differences in organisational processes, procurement routes and delivery responsibilities. The Collaborative Approach could be enhanced by providing more guidance on how to move from shared priorities to implementable projects and programmes.

Additional improvements to the Collaborative Approach are listed within the ‘Amber’ rated feedback in section 5.1.2.

6.2 Applicability beyond the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor

The following points summarise the key reasons why the Collaborative Approach is suitable for wider application beyond the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor.

- **The Collaborative Approach addresses challenges that are common beyond the OxCam Growth Corridor:** While the Collaborative Approach has been developed and trialled within the OxCam Growth Corridor, its principles, structure and intended outcomes are not geographically specific. The challenges it seeks to address, such as fragmented planning, misaligned investment cycles, and limited coordination between drainage and surface water management, are common across England and, in many cases, more widely across the UK.
- **There is a strong rationale for applying the Collaborative Approach more widely to support integrated planning:** The need for improved integration between DWMPs and local authority-led surface water management is not unique to the OxCam Growth Corridor. Many regions experience similar barriers, including differences in organisational responsibilities, varying levels of data maturity, and constraints on capacity and resourcing. As such, there is a strong rationale for applying the Collaborative Approach more broadly as a means of supporting more coordinated, place-based planning.
- **The Collaborative Approach is designed to be flexible and adaptable to different local contexts:** The Collaborative Approach has been intentionally designed to be flexible and scalable, allowing it to be adapted to different geographic, institutional and project contexts. It does not rely on specific governance arrangements or funding mechanisms unique to the OxCam Growth Corridor, but instead provides a structured framework that can be tailored to local circumstances. This makes it suitable for application across a range of partnership types, from early-stage collaborations to more mature, established partnerships.

- **The Collaborative Approach aligns with national policy priorities for integrated water management and collaboration:** Furthermore, national policy and regulatory drivers increasingly emphasise the importance of integrated water management, nature-based solutions, and cross-sector collaboration. The Collaborative Approach aligns with these priorities by encouraging early engagement, shared evidence development, and coordinated planning across organisations. Its wider adoption could therefore support more consistent delivery of these objectives at a national scale.
- **Wider application will help to refine and strengthen the Collaborative Approach over time:** Applying the Collaborative Approach beyond the OxCam Growth Corridor also presents an opportunity to further test, refine and strengthen it through use in a wider range of contexts. Different regions may bring new challenges, perspectives and innovations, which can help evolve the Collaborative Approach over time and improve its robustness and applicability.
- **Wider uptake offers a practical route to more integrated and effective water management outcomes:** In this context, wider uptake of the Collaborative Approach is not only appropriate but desirable. It offers a practical mechanism for bridging gaps between existing planning processes, improving the efficiency of plan-making, and supporting the delivery of more integrated and effective outcomes for flood risk and water management.

7. Conclusion

The findings of the project are summarised in the following bullet points:

- **The key challenge is not a lack of approaches, but the absence of a clear and adaptable way of working:** This project set out to explore how surface water management planning led by local authorities can be better aligned with DWMPs produced by WaSCs, in order to support more integrated, place-based delivery. Through a review of existing and emerging practice, alongside the development and trialling of a structured workflow, the project has shown that the key challenge is not a lack of approaches to joint planning, but the absence of a clear and adaptable way of working that enables organisations to align their plans, priorities and investment over time.
- **A structured workflow is more effective than prescribing specific approaches:** The review of existing and potential approaches highlighted the wide range of methods available to support joint planning. However, given the diversity and complexity of these approaches, the research concluded that it is neither practical nor beneficial to prescribe a single method or develop entirely new ones. Instead, there is greater value in establishing a structured workflow that can incorporate existing best practice, draw on prior work, and reference relevant case studies to support practical implementation.
- **An effective Collaborative Approach must reflect varying starting points and levels of partnership maturity:** The research also found that organisations approach collaboration from different starting points, reflecting variations in responsibilities, objectives, challenges, resources and spatial focus. Collaboration itself exists across a spectrum of maturity, from early-stage coordination to well-established partnerships with shared delivery mechanisms. An effective joint planning Collaborative Approach must therefore be flexible and scalable, capable of accommodating multiple entry points, supporting different levels of engagement, and operating across a range of organisational and geographic scales, while maintaining a coherent structure to enable alignment and integration over time.
- **The ten-stage Collaborative Approach provides a flexible framework to support practical collaboration and progression:** In response, the project developed a ten-stage Collaborative Approach designed to sit alongside existing planning and funding processes. Rather than prescribing specific methods, the Collaborative Approach provides a structured framework that enables partners to apply appropriate tools and techniques depending on their context and maturity. It encourages early identification of shared drivers and priorities, supports the development of a common evidence base, and helps partners move from parallel planning towards more coordinated and integrated delivery. The inclusion of multiple maturity pathways allows organisations to engage at a level appropriate to their current relationships and capacity, while providing a route for progression as partnerships evolve.
- **The Collaborative Approach is transferable and relevant beyond the OxCam region:** While the Collaborative Approach was developed and trialled within the OxCam Growth Corridor, the challenges it addresses are common across much of the UK. Fragmented planning, misaligned investment cycles, data constraints and capacity pressures are widely experienced, alongside increasing policy emphasis on integrated, place-based water management. The Collaborative Approach has therefore been intentionally designed to be transferable, offering a practical and adaptable mechanism to support wider application in different regional and organisational contexts.
- **Improved ways of working can enable more integrated and effective water management outcomes:** Overall, this project demonstrates that meaningful progress towards integrated surface water and drainage management can be achieved through improved ways of working. By providing a clear, flexible framework for collaboration, the Collaborative Approach enables partners to better align plans, coordinate investment, and deliver multi-benefit outcomes that support communities, infrastructure and the environment over the long term.

8. Appendices

Disclaimer: The appendices include supporting and draft material that is not finalised or assured to the same standard as the main report and are therefore available on request only

A.1 Task 1 Report – Review of existing relationships, gaps in joint working, gaps in evidence and risks.

Disclaimer: The appendices include supporting and draft material that is not finalised or assured to the same standard as the main report and are therefore available on request only

A.2 Task 2 Report – Approaches to Joint Planning

Disclaimer: The appendices include supporting and draft material that is not finalised or assured to the same standard as the main report and are therefore available on request only

A.3 Task 3 Report – Trialling the Approach

Disclaimer: The appendices include supporting and draft material that is not finalised or assured to the same standard as the main report and are therefore available on request only

A.4 Project Partner Feedback Workshops – A detailed summary

Disclaimer: The appendices include supporting and draft material that is not finalised or assured to the same standard as the main report and are therefore available on request only