



# **Business Plan 2024-2028**

DECEMBER 2023

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Develop a more comprehensive, fully  
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plan for Eastern England

### Strategic Priority 2:

Support catchment-scale activity across  
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sectors

### Strategic Priority 3:

Increase our membership, engagement  
and influence within the region

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Be thought leaders and pioneers of  
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Our vision

WRE's vision, retained from our previous business plan, is for Eastern England to have sufficient water resources to support a flourishing economy, a thriving environment and the needs of its population, and for the region to be seen as an international exemplar for collaborative integrated water resource management.

**Water Resources East (WRE) was formed in 2014 to develop a collaborative, cross-sector approach to water resources planning in Eastern England. We became an independent, not-for-profit company in 2019, with a multi-sector board of directors, to recognise the shared challenge in securing water resources and environmental improvements in the changing climate.**

We are one of five regional planning groups spanning England and parts of Wales tasked under the [National Framework for Water Resources](#) to develop a long-term water resources plan for their region.

Eastern England is the driest part of the country, receiving two-thirds of average national rainfall and classified by the Environment Agency as severely water stressed. Growth and the changing climate are placing additional pressures on the environment. Only 8% of water bodies in the east are in good health, measured against the Water Framework

Regulations 2017 criteria of Good Ecological Status or Good Ecological Potential, falling well short of the [national 'clean and plentiful water' target of at least 75%](#). Depleted groundwater aquifers and a lack of flow within rivers are amongst the reasons for this.

Following an Emerging Plan published in January 2022, WRE published its first [full draft Regional Water Resources Plan for Eastern England](#) on 14th November 2022. We published a [Consultation Response](#) on 14th July 2023 to summarise the feedback we received on our draft plan and how we intend to address it. The final version of our Regional Plan is due in December 2023.

The government and regulators wrote to the five regional groups in January 2023 to confirm [a second round of regional planning will take place](#). We assume this will begin straight away in 2024 and conclude in 2028 to inform the next water sector Price Review in 2029 (PR29). To inform the second round, the Environment Agency will publish a revised version of the National Framework for Water Resources in spring 2025.

### Key characteristics of the WRE region



Home to the majority of England's most fertile soils for agricultural production.



Driest region in the UK, receiving two thirds of average national rainfall.



One of the highest rates of housing and population growth in the UK.



Home to a significant number of chalk rivers and the UK's largest extent of lowland peat.



Key water sources needed for future hydrogen production.



Over 125 miles of navigable waterways and the UK's largest lowland drainage network.

## Strategic priorities for 2024 – 2028

This document describes how we will be working over the next five years to increase our impact within the region, as we work with our members to deliver our flagship projects and develop the second iteration of our Regional Plan. This will help to take forward action to help address the projected water shortages we have identified and deliver shared solutions that serve multiple sectors and help restore, protect and improve the environment.

## Monitoring progress and reviewing our plans

As WRE has to date, we will continue do this through detailed co-creation, engagement and collaboration with key national, regional and local stakeholders, including regulators and policy-makers. As this business plan is being launched before the next National Framework for Water Resources is published in 2025, and with other relevant

policies under review (such as the future of River Basin Management Planning and other elements of [Defra's Plan for Water](#)) a substantive revision of the plan may be required mid-period. In any case the plan will be based on a 1: 3: 5 approach: a one year budget in the context of a three-year corporate plan informed by a five-year direction of travel.

In the meantime we have developed an initial set of success measures relating to each of our five strategic priorities. We will report progress against these at each Annual General Meeting. We also intend to report twice a year to government, regulators and our members and other stakeholders on the progress being made in delivering the Regional Water Resources Plan for Eastern England.

**WRE's strategic priorities for the business plan period are:**

**1**

Develop a more comprehensive, fully multi-sector, regional water resources plan for Eastern England.

**2**

Support catchment-scale activity across the region to enable long-term planning and environmental improvement across sectors.

**3**

Increase our membership, engagement and influence within the region.

**4**

Be thought leaders and pioneers of collaborative approaches to integrated water management, helping to shape international best practice, national government policy and local delivery.

**5**

Continue to strengthen WRE's governance and funding.



Figure 2: Measures of success that we will use to monitor progress

Strategic priorities	Measures of success
<p><b>1</b> Develop a more comprehensive, fully multi-sector, regional water resources plan for Eastern England</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More resilient water supplies for all sectors, including in times of drought</li> <li>• Progress toward achieving the 'Enhance' environmental destination outcomes by 2040 at the latest, with early delivery in priority waterbodies</li> </ul>
<p><b>2</b> Support catchment-scale activity across the region to enable long-term planning and environmental improvement across sectors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Catchment-scale plans show how future water needs for all sectors can be satisfied</li> <li>• Future plans for economic and housing growth, agricultural production and net zero energy investment recognise and are consistent with the water scarcity challenge</li> </ul>
<p><b>3</b> Increase our membership, engagement and influence within the region</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• WRE members feel involved and engaged in our work as part of a collaborative, co-creation process</li> <li>• Others' plans such as local nature recovery strategies, local development plans and CaBA partnership plans deliver improvements to the water environment</li> </ul>
<p><b>4</b> Be thought leaders and pioneers of collaborative approaches to integrated water management, helping to shape national government policy and local delivery</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• WRE's policy priorities taken forward by government, including in the next National Framework and wider reforms proposed to governance of the water environment</li> <li>• Water company investment in strategic resource options deliver wider public benefits</li> <li>• Integrated water management pilots and projects are underway in every part of the region</li> </ul>
<p><b>5</b> Continue to strengthen WRE's governance and funding</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• WRE funded to achieve its vision and multi-sector planning ambitions</li> <li>• WRE's board continues to have strong sector and geographic representation and improving gender and ethnic diversity</li> </ul>





## **OUR DEVELOPING ROLE**

### Why WRE was formed

**WRE has evolved significantly since its inception. We were formed in 2014 to pioneer a collaborative approach to water resources planning in Eastern England.**

Instead of the traditional approach, in which water companies and others look at water resource planning for their respective areas in isolation, WRE brought together companies, retailers, regulators and individuals in the water, agriculture, power and environmental sectors. It looked at the needs and potential synergies across all these organisations to balance the considerations of customers and communities, agriculture, the economy and the environment.<sup>1</sup>

- Our beginnings stem from the [Sink or Swim](#) report by the Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership. This explored the need for co-operation between businesses, water companies and the government in managing scarce water resources and securing future supplies.
- Water UK then published its [Water Resources Long Term Planning Framework](#) in 2016. The project team was led by Jean Spencer, then Regulation Director at Anglian Water, who has since become independent chair of the National Framework for Water Resources Senior Steering Group.
- This was followed in 2018 by the National Infrastructure Commission's report [Preparing for a drier future](#). This projected a deficit of 4,000 million litres of water per day (Ml/d) by 2050, recommended that government ensure plans are in place to address it, and reinforced taking a 'twin-track approach' that balances new supply-side infrastructure with efforts to tackle leakage and reduce demand. The report also recommended the government adopt the 1 in 500 year drought resilience standard for public water supplies now built into regional and water company plans.

- A [joint letter](#) from government and regulators in June 2018 called for 'regional water resources planning that transcends company boundaries and identifies optimum solutions for the region and the nation as a whole' together with 'greater use of markets and competition to ensure solutions are delivered efficiently'. Three further regional groups were created at this stage – Water Resources North, Water Resources West, and West Country Water Resources – to complement WRE and Water Resources South East. WRSE was set up as a collaboration between water companies as early as the mid-1990s.
- The first [National Framework for Water Resources](#) was published in March 2020. As well as describing the national and regional context for water resources planning, it set a series of requirements for the production of regional plans.

Collaboration is particularly important in the east considering the present and future pressures on water resources, and the challenge of managing the demands of intensive agricultural production, energy generation, food manufacturing and a rising population. The east also faces potential additional water needs associated with alternative energy sources such as green hydrogen and new business and commercial developments.

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller description of WRE's formation please see [Guide to innovative, multi-sector regional water resources planning](#).

## Current approach to governance and funding

### Membership and governance

WRE became a separate legal entity in 2019, and we now operate as an independent, not-for-profit membership organisation. Our [Articles of Association](#) define our purpose as a series of 'objects' and describe our two types of membership:

**Principal funding members:** these organisations collectively fund our core costs and in return can nominate two directors to sit on our board (a principal funding director and a nominated deputy). We currently have 12 principal funding member seats. These are the four water companies operating in the region together with representatives from local authorities, the farming, developer and energy sectors, and internal drainage boards. This means that water companies are in the minority on our board.

**Standard members:** standard membership is free and open to all organisations that have an interest in the sustainable management of water resources in the region. Our standard members form our **Strategic Advisory Group** and have equal voting rights with principal funding members at our Annual General Meeting. We have more than 180 members at present – a list of these together with an online application form [can be found on our website](#). The liability of all members is limited to £1, which is the maximum each member of the company would contribute to the assets of the company in the event of WRE being wound up. Membership applications are subject to internal due diligence before being approved by the Board of Directors.

Our **Board of Directors** consists of an independent chair, two executive directors (WRE's Managing Director and Technical Director), our principal funding directors, and two **stakeholder directors** representing charitable or other not-for-profit organisations that do not have the financial means to contribute toward our core costs.

WRE also has a wider **Consultation Group** that is formed of organisations who do not wish to, or are unable to, become members of the company, for example government organisations, regulators, and customer representatives. Members of this group do not have formal voting rights but are integral to bringing a broad view beyond the membership, welcome challenge and specialised knowledge.

Membership of the Strategic Advisory Group and the Consultation Group is open and inclusive, and hopefully very diverse, to ensure that the broadest possible set of views are sought and considered early on and throughout the development of the Regional Plan and our other projects.

WRE also organises a number of sub-groups and other forums that support our work:

- **Technical Delivery Group:** this group helps steer our technical programme and is drawn from lead sector experts from within our membership and consultation group. Meetings are chaired by WRE's Technical Director.
- **Investment Board:** this group consists of those members funding the technical programme underpinning our Regional Plan and related projects. Members agree budgets and approve individual lines of expenditure. As all of our technical programme funding currently comes from water companies, our Investment Board consists of our four water company members and WRE's Managing Director, Technical Director and Independent Chair. Project costs are typically split between member water companies based on their share of population within the region. As and when other sources of funding are secured for our technical programme we will expand membership to include other sector representatives.
- **Agri-Environment Task & Finish Group:** this group focuses in particular on the assessment of environmental needs underpinning our Regional Plan and the implications of this for all sectors. Members include farming, IDB, energy, navigation and abstraction group representatives, and environmental groups, and is chaired by WRE's Technical Director.

Figure 3: Governance structure underpinned by our Articles of Association



- **WRE Drought Group:** this new forum followed the widespread agricultural and environmental drought that impacted the region in 2022. The group meets monthly to discuss the latest situation, identify immediate opportunities to share water between sectors and protect the environment, whilst overseeing longer-term work to explore new sources of water and approaches that could alleviate future drought impacts. Membership includes the Environment Agency and representatives of water companies, the farming, energy and navigation sectors, together with abstractor groups and IDBs.
- The **South Lincolnshire Water Partnership** and **Fens Water Partnership:** these cross-sector stakeholder forums seek to foster greater collaboration between partners to achieve improved water management and environmental outcomes in the relevant catchments. The forums are helping to guide the design of the two strategic reservoir projects so they achieve much wider public value including for nature, agriculture and navigation. WRE chairs both forums and organises the Fens Water Partnership. The South Lincs Water Partnership has been running for longer, has a broader remit as part of the Lincolnshire Flood Risk & Water Management Partnership, and is organised by Black Sluice IDB and the Environment Agency. Both forums help drive forward the **Future Fens: Integrated Adaptation** strategy that WRE co-leads together with Anglian Water, the Environment Agency and the Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority.
- A number of other groups ensure coordination of the public water supply aspects of the Regional Plan, including an **Alignment Group**, **Demand Group**, **Simulator Group**, and **Planning Group**.
- The Board also has formal sub-committees including an **Audit & Risk Committee** and a **Nominations & Remuneration Committee**. A Scheme of Delegation approved by the Board of Directors defines where responsibility and accountability for key decisions rest.

## Funding our Regional Plan and wider activity

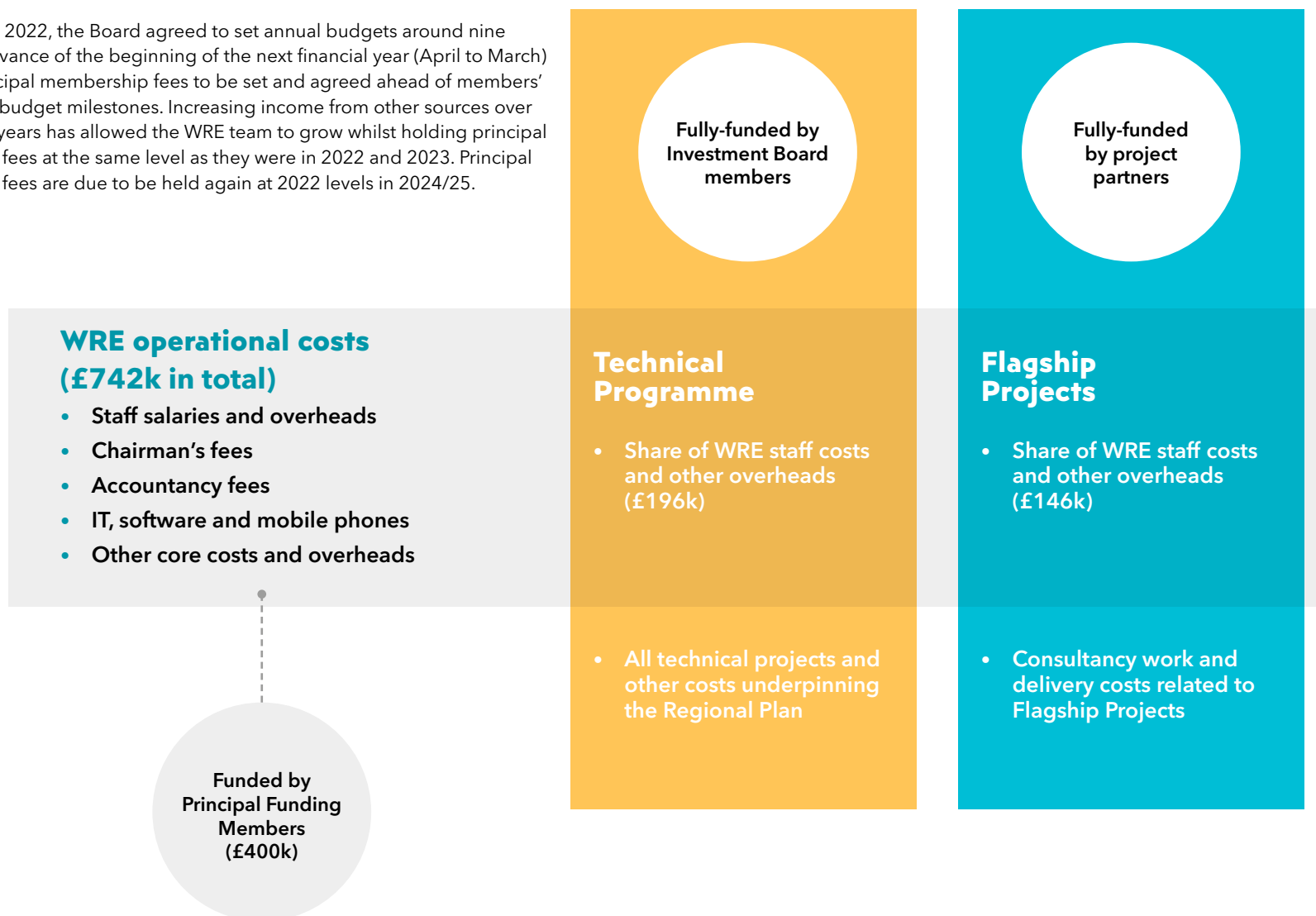
WRE's expenditure falls into three broad categories, each with its own sources of funding. These are described below and the relationship between them is illustrated in the figure overleaf, including indicative figures for the 2024/25 financial year.

- **Core operational costs:** Principal funding members meet WRE's core running costs between them according to the rules set out in our Articles of Association. Costs in this category include the majority of staff salaries and related overheads, office and IT costs, travel and subsistence, insurance and chair's fees. All of WRE's staff work from home and we only subscribe to a virtual office service provided by UEA. This keeps our overall costs down and means that staff salaries, pensions, chair's fees and other people-related costs account for around 85% of our operational budget. Other major costs include accountancy fees, corporate insurance, training and development, and occasional room hire for meetings and events. Budgets are set each year by the Board of Directors alongside decisions on the level of principal funding member fees for future years.
- **Technical Programme:** This includes all the technical studies, modelling and other consultancy work underpinning our regional plan, together with a share of WRE's staff costs for team members overseeing and delivering the programme. The Technical Programme also pays for report production costs and relevant events such as Technical Delivery Group meetings. Budgets are set and costs approved by the Investment Board, who also agree how to share these costs between them.
- **Flagship Projects:** These more localised projects are funded by sponsor organisations and wider sources of funding that WRE bids for and secures on a case-by-case basis. Staff costs and other overheads are recharged to the relevant flagship project(s) so that our principal funding members do not cross-subsidise work that only benefits some sectors or specific parts of the region. New flagship projects, and all significant contracts, grant agreements and expenditure are approved by the Audit & Risk Committee.



**Figure 4: How WRE's operational, technical and project costs are funded**

In December 2022, the Board agreed to set annual budgets around nine months in advance of the beginning of the next financial year (April to March) to allow principal membership fees to be set and agreed ahead of members' own internal budget milestones. Increasing income from other sources over the past few years has allowed the WRE team to grow whilst holding principal membership fees at the same level as they were in 2022 and 2023. Principal membership fees are due to be held again at 2022 levels in 2024/25.



### WRE's commercial strategy

Whilst WRE is a not-for-profit company, we aim to generate a surplus from the Technical Programme and our Flagship Projects to build and maintain an appropriate level of financial reserves.

We do this in two main ways:

1 We recharge staff time to projects at **day rates** based on a multiplier of salaries, so that as a minimum, projects fully cover staff costs and other relevant overheads. Where projects have financial and contractual risks, or where we are in essence providing a consultancy service, we apply a higher multiplier of staff salaries when setting day rates.

2 Where we commission consultancy projects and manage external contractors on behalf of others we will also apply **management fees**. These reflect the additional overheads and risk we are taking on in agreeing contracts, managing budgets and finances, and in project management.

Building reserves will be important for our financial resilience, and in time, could allow the Board to approve additional pro-bono activity and possibly invest in its own projects and activity without seeking additional funding from board members or other partners.

Our reserves are not sufficient at this stage to allow us to do this, but we hope will build to this point during the period of this business plan. In the meantime, all significant pro-bono roles and activity that only benefit certain sectors or catchments needs to be approved by the Board of Directors. Current pro bono activity includes:

- Chairing the South Lincolnshire Water Partnership.
- Chairing and organising the Fens Water Partnership.
- Helping abstractors secure more sustainable sources of water by administering and chairing the Ant Valley Water Resources Delivery Group.
- Supporting the Cambridge Water Scarcity Working Group.

**Note:** our constitution requires any financial reserves and other assets we hold to be dedicated to our mission and objects, and cannot be paid as dividends nor otherwise distributed to our members. As we are not a registered charity, we pay corporation tax on any net surplus we generate each financial year.

## Future direction

### Role and remit of regional planning groups

**With the first round of regional water resources planning coming to an end, the Environment Agency has begun the process of identifying lessons and reviewing the framework for the next round of regional planning.**

This follows [confirmation in January 2023](#) that there would be a second round of regional planning continuing on from the first. The joint letter also provided an early steer from government and regulators on their priorities for the next round, including:

- **Greater water supply resilience**, including to drought amongst direct abstractors such as irrigators and energy generators.
- **Improved water efficiency and demand management**, including to help meet national targets that have been set for household and non-household users of the public water supply.
- **Ambitious environmental planning** that ensures the environment is integral to assessment of future water needs, with improvements prioritised and agreed collaboratively, so that pressures can be addressed proactively and in a sustainable way.
- **Greater value for money** by developing robust projections of water needs and scoping a broad and innovative range of options for improving supply resilience, including new transfers, cross-company options, cross-sector options and new strategic resources.
- **Effective regional engagement** by maintaining a strategic overview of regional priorities and ensuring the public and stakeholders, such as local planning authorities and catchment partnerships, are engaged and inform the plans.

The letter also signals government's intention that regional groups *"should be front and centre in creating a secure and sustainable future for England's waters in the face of the climate and biodiversity emergency."* Regional groups should also *"show strong leadership in a more holistic and integrated approach to water management, exploring opportunities to deliver cross sector mutual benefits."* These ambitions are very much in line with WRE's vision.

Whilst not specifically referencing the future of regional planning, these themes were reinforced in Defra's [Plan for Water](#) published in April 2023. The plan proposes to move water and flood risk management toward a much more holistic, integrated, catchment-based approach. The plan also restates the national statutory targets for water set under the Environment Act 2021 and presented in the [Environmental Improvement Plan 2023](#), and included new interim targets for leakage and overall water consumption per capita.

Implementation of the Plan for Water could heavily influence how WRE and the other regional groups develop in future. For example, regional groups could play a role in helping to coordinate activity and investment in water and environmental land management at the catchment and regional scales, translating national targets into effective local delivery, by bridging across existing organisational responsibilities and providing a degree of cross-sector governance and assurance.

This could lead to the remit of regional groups broadening to include planning for improved environmental and raw water quality and ensuring effective coordination with Local Nature Recovery Strategies and relevant Environmental Land Management and Biodiversity Net Gain proposals. It could also include some aspects of flood risk management, such as to promote natural flood management options as part of catchment and nature-based approaches, working closely with Regional Flood and Coastal Committees, Lead Local Flood Authorities, water companies and the Environment Agency.

We are not alone in this thinking. To help develop their own thoughts about their future direction, Water Resources West [published a paper](#) that included four indicative models that regional groups might consider adopting in future.

To consider these and other options in more detail, and make recommendations to government, three studies have been commissioned by the Environment Agency that are due to report early in 2024.

- A review of the **governance** underpinning the five regional planning groups. Current approaches differ across the groups, and this study may make recommendations on minimum governance requirements or perhaps suggest some convergence in how groups are set up and operate.
- Scoping of potential **funding** routes and sources to underpin the next and future rounds of regional planning. This is especially important to fund regional groups' multi-sector roles and non-public water supply analysis that water companies are not allowed to cross-subsidise from customer bills.
- Options and recommendations for the **next National Framework for Water Resources** itself.

Further work on these themes and then consultation is expected in 2024 to finalise and publish a revised National Framework for Water Resources in spring 2025.

It may therefore be some time before the government's intentions for regional groups becomes clear. But rather than wait for this, we propose to lead by example and take forward a number of initiatives that will help us test and refine where we can add most value in delivering aspects of the Plan for Water and the next National Framework. These proposals fit neatly as early actions listed under our proposed strategic priorities for 2024 - 2028 set out in the next section.



## Long-term vision – regional groups as catchment systems integrators?

*Adapted from [Regional Planning for the Future](#)  
([Water Resources West](#), April 2023)*

Integrated water management brings together water resources, water quality and flooding planning in a holistic way to achieve a range of economic, social, and environmental outcomes. If we are to achieve this there will need to be more coordination of plans and activities and greater alignment of funding and incentives across catchments and systems.

There is potential for the regional groups to build on their successes and extend into integrated water management. Such groups could help translate national outcomes and policy into effective local delivery, by bringing together a top-down vision and priorities for a catchment or area with bottom-up projects and activity to create a single integrated plan.

This will mean bringing together water companies, regulators, other sectors, local authorities, catchment partnerships and others to coordinate their activity. This would involve deepening and broadening our governance model, and raises questions about accountability that would need to be resolved.

The goal would be to create a holistic view of water resources, water quality and flood risk challenges and how they can best be addressed in an integrated way, through a combination of grey and green infrastructure, together with land-use and behaviour change. The approach could be tailored to reflect different geographies and the nature and scale of the challenges. Regional groups shouldn't seek to undertake coordination that is already being effectively achieved. However there may be areas of the region where deeply entrenched problems can only be resolved by more joined-up thinking, planning and coordination.

Water companies are increasingly seeking to take a role as catchment operators. For example United Utilities is taking a [Catchment Systems Thinking](#) approach, developing better ways of working through co-governance, collaboration and partnerships. Anglian Water is proposing a similar approach for [Norfolk and the Cam & Ely Ouse](#) catchments as part of an Advanced WINEP proposal for 2025-2030. Both initiatives involve close working with catchment partnerships through the catchment-based approach. A regional tier of coordination would not seek to replace such examples of good practice but support them whilst targeting other areas and outcomes where there are coordination gaps. This could include:

- Establishing and supporting delivery of common approaches where this would bring benefits, e.g. natural capital accounting, environmental assessment, climate change assessments.
- Developing the capability to integrate water quality, flood risk and water resources planning.
- Sharing best practice, e.g. through forums and exemplar projects.
- Increasing the availability and accessibility of environmental data and evidence.
- Facilitating closer integration on shared catchments.
- Supporting cross-catchment optimisation where appropriate and especially for water resources, but also where would add value to water quality and flood planning.
- Prioritising and communicating opportunities across the region to aid the allocation of funding to areas of greatest benefit.
- Supporting stakeholder engagement.

The key to making this work would be flexibility: recognising where coordination is already effective, and elsewhere where a regional tier of coordination would add value. Water quality and flooding considerations are naturally more catchment-focused, but regional support in the ways described above could help address some key coordination and governance gaps.



### Proposed changes to funding and governance

**Despite the generosity of our principal funding members and other partners, our activity is heavily constrained by our current funding model. As our Regional Plan makes clear, we have received very little funding to date to conduct multi-sector analysis and commission studies that support water resources planning by non-public water supply users.**

There is an urgent need for that to change if we are to fulfil our potential and meet the expectations of our members, regulators and other stakeholders. Together with other regional groups we have made a number of suggestions to government. We hope the Environment Agency's study looking at the funding of regional planning will help resolve these funding gaps very soon.

Our 'pay to play' approach to board membership is also less than ideal. It limits board membership to those able to make a financial contribution to our core expenditure, rather than those organisations and individuals that have the right skills and experience and breadth of perspectives to drive our strategy. Fortunately, the board directors we have would be likely to be appointed in any event should we move to a merits-based approach. But financial pressures within home organisations have led to a number of high-profile principal funding members having to withdraw from our board, leaving some sectors and geographies under-represented.

We therefore propose to move away from our principal funding membership model as soon as an alternative funding source to meet our core costs is secured. At that stage we would seek approval from the Strategic Advisory Group at the next AGM to revise our Articles of Association to:

- Retain the concept of standard members forming our Strategic Advisory Group, with full voting rights as now.
- Retain board membership for our two executive directors and independent chair.
- Withdraw the concept of principal funding members other than for water companies who would continue to fund a share of our core costs as they do now.
- Increase the maximum number of stakeholder director seats with existing non-public water supply principal funding members offered these vacancies first.
- Fill any remaining and future vacancies with additional stakeholder directors using an open call process, to achieve stronger representation across sectors and geographies and improve the diversity of board members in general.
- All directors would be able to nominate a deputy to attend meetings in their absence.

In the meantime, for the foreseeable future, our principal funding membership model needs to continue and at the present time is assumed necessary for the period of this business plan.



# VISION AND STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

## WRE's vision

WRE's vision is for Eastern England to have sufficient water resources to support a flourishing economy, a thriving environment and the needs of its population, and for the region to be seen as an international exemplar for collaborative integrated water resource management.

## Vision and strategic priorities

**Our core role during the next business planning period will be to develop the second iteration of our Regional Water Resources Plan for Eastern England as part of the next five-year planning cycle.**

The key milestones for this are yet to be established but we assume that our next Regional Plan will be subject to consultation in 2027 and finalised in 2028.

In this context, and in light of the proposals in Defra's Plan for Water, the Board has reviewed WRE's existing vision and concluded it remains fit for purpose through to the end of this second round in 2028. However, we would review this again once the next National Framework for Water Resources is published in spring 2025.

Whilst the detailed expectations and requirements for the second round of regional planning are not yet defined, its success will depend on regional groups being able to provide much greater support for water resources planning by all sectors at a range

of scales, and to contribute toward wider water quality, flood risk management, nature restoration and carbon sequestration objectives.

To drive forward our business plan, the Managing Director, Technical Director and team will be directly accountable for the delivery of the following five strategic priorities, reporting through to the Independent Chair and the Board of Directors. We hope that these priorities will be co-owned by the entire membership of WRE, and that members will endorse them and play a key role in their delivery, supported and enabled by our regulatory and other partners. Each of our Strategic Priorities are described in more detail in the sections that follow. Under each priority, we highlight a number of early actions we intend to take forward ahead of the next National Framework being finalised in 2025.

Each of the priorities also have associated measures of success. We have tried to make these as specific and measurable as possible, but recognise that in some cases progress will be difficult to quantify and instead we will need to consider more qualitative evidence. We intend to report to members on progress against these success measures at each Annual General Meeting.

### Our five strategic priorities for 2024 to 2028:

1

Develop a more comprehensive, fully multi-sector, regional water resources plan for Eastern England.

2

Support catchment-scale activity across the region to enable long-term planning and environmental improvement across sectors.

3

Increase our membership, engagement and influence within the region.

4

Be thought leaders and pioneers of collaborative approaches to integrated water management, helping to shape international best practice, national government policy and local delivery.

5

Continue to strengthen WRE's governance and funding.

# STRATEGIC PRIORITY



**Develop a more comprehensive, fully multi-sector, regional water resources plan for Eastern England.**

## Measures of success for this priority:

- More resilient water supplies for all sectors, including in times of drought
- Progress toward achieving the 'Enhance' environmental destination outcomes by 2040 at the latest, with early delivery in priority waterbodies

WRE was established to develop a collaborative, long-term approach to regional water resources planning and this will remain our core objective. We will reflect on the lessons from the first round of regional planning and look forward to continuing to work with all of our stakeholders as we move straight into a second round, starting in earnest in 2024 and expected to conclude in 2028.

Whilst work to refresh the National Framework for Water Resources is only just beginning, we know our members, as well as government and regulators, would like us to develop a more comprehensive plan that supports and encapsulates more detailed planning by individual abstractors and sectors within specific catchments.

However, we believe our role should be to support improved water resources planning by other sectors, rather than to perform this function for them. We can help in several ways, such as commissioning studies, helping to build capability, and by developing tools and datasets for widespread use. As we do now, we will continue to provide a regional-scale, multi-sector context for more localised, sector-specific plans. We will also integrate the results of sector and catchment-level plans into our own regional-scale modelling and outputs. But we firmly believe responsibility for producing sector-specific water resources and drought plans should remain with individual abstractors (including farmers, energy companies etc), water abstraction groups, and water companies.

To an extent, work on the next regional plan is already underway, as we know two early priorities are to initiate more detailed 'environmental destination' investigations in priority catchments, and to look again in more detail at supply-side options that could meet the water resource needs of both the public water supply and other sectors.

## Early actions under this priority include:

- Review technical approaches together with other regional groups, national and local stakeholders and leading academics to develop **a new methodology and toolset to support the second round** of regional, adaptive, multi-sector planning.
- Work closely with our water company members to make an early start on their **Water Industry National Environment Programme** commitments for 2025-2030. Specifically, we will help shape and coordinate the detailed WINEP investigations so that they underpin Environmental Destination requirements and options for all sectors in our next regional plan. These detailed studies could identify a range of ways to achieve the required environmental improvements, including through floodplain reconnection, river restoration and other nature-based approaches, rather than purely through changes to abstraction licences.
- Improve the evidence base for **projecting growth in new non-household demand** for potable and non-potable connections. Local plans do not currently provide the evidence needed for water companies to plan ahead and secure investment at the scale needed, resulting in requests for new connections having to be refused. This could limit economic growth in water scarce areas.

## During the 2024 – 2028 period, we propose to:

- **Monitor and evaluate implementation of our first Regional Plan** using both qualitative and quantitative datasets and publish progress reports for members, government and regulators. Following discussions with the regional groups, the Environment Agency has proposed that we should publish a progress report each summer to coincide with the existing WRMP annual review. These annual reports should track a suite of supply and demand-side metrics, and include updates on programme delivery and an assessment of the need to adapt or take action to mitigate any delays that may have arisen.

A second annual 'check point' report each winter would provide an update on wider progress covering engagement with non-public water supply sectors and the delivery of multi-sector environmental investigations. This report could also include a progress update on the next round of regional planning, including the identification of new options and inter-regional collaboration.

- Work with sector experts and leading academics to **update projections of water demand for all sectors**, focusing in particular on agriculture, navigation, industry, green hydrogen and other energy sector water use.
- Work with the other regional groups to explore further opportunities for **strategic, inter-regional transfers** as part of a coherent national water resources strategy.
- Work with WRE's members to refresh the **long list of supply-side options** that could meet the needs of all sectors in our second Regional Plan. As well as strategic supply and transfer options, the list should include catchment and nature-based solutions, rain and grey water recycling, effluent reuse, managed aquifer recharge and innovative demand-side technologies.



# STRATEGIC PRIORITY

## 2

**Support catchment-scale activity across the region to enable long-term planning and environmental improvement across sectors.**

### Measures of success for this priority:

- Catchment-scale plans show how future water needs for all sectors can be satisfied
- Future plans for economic and housing growth, agricultural production and net zero energy investment recognise and are consistent with the water scarcity challenge

We expect the revised National Framework to place a much greater emphasis on multi-sector, catchment-scale planning supported by regional groups. We have already been testing and piloting elements of catchment-scale planning, through the Water for Tomorrow project in partnership with the Rivers Trust and the Environment Agency, the Norfolk Water Strategy Programme, and for example by sponsoring specific technical work to explore the potential water resources and flood risk benefits of the Bedford to Milton Keynes Waterway Park.

We would like to continue to develop our ability to support catchment-scale planning and other activity with our partners, such as to play an important role in helping local authorities to develop their local nature recovery strategies. But our work to date in these areas has been funded on a piecemeal basis by individual partners and other sponsors as and when funding is available. We hope to secure a more reliable and long-term source of funding from government to allow us to develop our capability and increase our engagement at the catchment scale across the region in the years ahead (see Strategic Priority 5).

As mentioned under the previous priority, our role will be to support abstractor groups and catchment partnerships to prepare water resources plans that meet their needs, rather than take this role on ourselves.

However, there is a complementary role that WRE can play in developing tools and commissioning datasets on catchment and region-wide scales, on a multi-sector basis, that local groups can access and use to develop their own water resources plans. By openly sharing data between us we can integrate the results of these detailed local plans and strategies into our next multi-sector regional plan and make the case to government and regulators for further funding support.

## Early actions under this priority include:

- Subject to funding, working with abstractor groups, the NFU, Defra, the Rivers Trust, the Environment Agency and other regional groups to develop **catchment-scale tools that support multi-sector planning**, and work in partnership with abstractor groups to identify **local water resource options** that may meet their needs. This will build upon the work of WRE's Agri-Environment Task and Finish Group and the Water for Tomorrow programme that drew to a close early in 2023. We await further details from Defra following ministerial commitments to fund national, regional and local-scale agricultural water resources planning made at the [UK Farm to Fork summit](#) in May 2023.
- If funded, commission further work to explore how to meet the high aspirations for growth being considered by the **Cambridge Delivery Group** whilst delivering the necessary reductions in abstraction from the local chalk aquifer. These should include options that accelerate water efficiency programmes, create more water storage and new local resource options for all sectors, in order to accommodate higher rates of growth than currently included in local plan projections.
- Help Essex County Council launch the outputs of the **Essex Water Strategy** and draw lessons for future projects elsewhere in the region, for example on water and environmental data visualisation and public engagement.

## During the 2024 – 2028 period, we propose to:

- Develop stronger relationships with **catchment partnerships and the Catchment-Based Approach**, including the CaBA National Water Resources Group. We will be developing and piloting training materials to help local partnerships to understand water resource pressures and build proposals and local water resources options as part of their future catchment plans. We can also provide a regional-scale forum for catchment partnerships to get together and share lessons and expertise.
- Subject to any third-party licence constraints, **publish all datasets that we commission** in a timely and transparent way to support planning by all sectors.
- Continue to **build in-house skills and capacity** to support multi-sector planning at a range of scales.
- Contribute toward national initiatives that focus on **accelerating catchment and nature-based solution delivery**. This includes the Rivers Trust-led partnership that has been funded by Ofwat to take forward a five-year programme of activity to scale the delivery of nature-based solutions across the country.
- Support the **Bedford to Milton Keynes Waterway** partnership to take forward proposals for connecting the Grand Union Canal and the river Great Ouse with a new waterway park for navigation and amenity that also delivers water resources and flood risk management benefits.

# STRATEGIC PRIORITY



**Increase our membership, engagement and influence within the region.**

## Measures of success for this priority:

- WRE members feel involved and engaged in our work as part of a collaborative, co-creation process
- Others' plans such as local nature recovery strategies, local development plans and CaBA partnership plans deliver improvements to the water environment

We have successfully built up our number of standard members to over 180 organisations, with more seeking to join all the time. Our membership is an important source of guidance, inspiration and feedback, and accountability, as we develop our plans and projects. We propose to continue with the current approach to standard membership and are looking for ways to increase our level of engagement. We would be interested to hear if there is more we could do to enhance the benefits of being a member as we refresh our engagement strategy for the second round.

We will also continue for the time being with our approach to board membership, primarily consisting of directors nominated by our Principal Funding Members who between them fund our core costs. However, as discussed earlier, as and when an alternative, secure source of funding is found we would move away from our principal funding membership model for non-public water supply sector stakeholders in order to strengthen our independence and increase sector and geographic representation on our board.

We have also been considering whether there is appetite to create a new middle-tier of membership, which might generate sponsorship or other income to reinvest in our mission, but would not be tied to a seat on the board.

## Early actions under this priority include:

- Develop a new **stakeholder engagement strategy** to support WRE's aim for regional planning to be a collaborative, co-creation process involving all our members and wider consultation group, and to take on board the findings of the current governance review of regional planning. The new engagement strategy may involve creating new forums and sub-groups looking at specific sectors or cross-cutting themes and issues. We will also make use of existing national and regional sectoral forums if they exist.
- Launch a **Norfolk Water Fund** as a blended investment vehicle, and support the Anglian Water/Rivers Trust **East of England Planning Hub** to build capacity and develop a strong pipeline of nature-based solutions projects that deliver multiple objectives. Both of these initiatives will help lay the foundations for Anglian Water's **Advanced WINEP** ('A-WINEP') proposal for AMP8 (2025-2030) that will take a more, holistic, outcome-based approach to environmental improvement across the Norfolk and Cam & Ely Ouse catchments.
- Subject to funding, we propose to support lead authorities across the region to prepare their **local nature recovery strategies**, so that these contribute toward national targets for the water environment and help deliver improvements in water resources and environmental water quality. The work to date on the Norfolk Water Strategy Programme means we are best placed to do this for Norfolk County Council, but we will support other responsible authorities too if we can.

## During the 2024 – 2028 period, we propose to:

- We will continue to develop **WRE's Drought Group** to seek multi-sector opportunities to share water and to promote ways in which all sectors and public water supply customers can use it more efficiently. This could involve WRE taking more of a prominent, public-facing role to complement and amplify water efficiency messaging by water companies and other members, and to provide an independent, cross-sector voice to support local and regional media engagement. We also propose to help members investigate smaller-scale options such as local water reuse and managed aquifer recharge that could achieve multi-sector benefits and protect the environment during periods of dry weather and drought.
- Continue to **attract new standard members** to WRE and increase the frequency and depth of engagement through webinars, newsletters and social media activity.
- Consider **new types of membership or sponsorship opportunities** to create new sources of income for our work in return for deeper engagement, insight and value for those taking part.
- Take a more prominent role in **media and public engagement** to champion the need to conserve water, invest in new supply-side infrastructure, and protect the environment, in support of and consistent with members' own campaigns.
- **Champion the need for greater water efficiency and investment in new sources of supply** at prominent conferences, workshops and other events in the region, nationally and internationally.
- **Provide strategic input wherever we can, as resources allow, to important plans and strategies being developed by others in the region.** This would include local development plans, climate change adaptation strategies, flood risk management plans and strategies, as well as local nature recovery strategies mentioned above.
- **Forge closer ties with key academic and research institutions** to develop shared work-programmes and foster the next generation of water resources professionals.

# STRATEGIC PRIORITY



**Be thought leaders and pioneers of collaborative approaches to integrated water management, helping to shape international best practice, national government policy and local delivery.**

## Measures of success for this priority:

- WRE's policy priorities taken forward by government, including in the next National Framework and wider reforms proposed to governance of the water environment
- Water company investment in strategic resource options deliver wider public benefits
- Integrated water management pilots and projects are underway in every part of the region

There is a general recognition that current approaches to addressing pressures on the water environment are failing to deliver statutory requirements and the expectations of stakeholders and the public. 92% of waterbodies in Eastern England are below 'good' ecological status or potential, and no waterbody meets the criteria for good chemical (and therefore overall) status. This is in stark contrast to the national target in the [2023 Environmental Improvement Plan](#) for at least three-quarters of waterbodies to be close to their natural state as soon as is practicable.

Whilst there has been significant investment by water companies, resulting in improvements to some of the underlying indicators of good health, overall performance has proven stubborn to shift. And there are high profile examples nationally of where governance and stewardship of river systems has clearly failed, such as on stretches of the River Wye in Wales and Herefordshire.

There are many systemic reasons for this. A lack of coordination around priorities, funding and regulation, and structural and institutional weaknesses and inertia. Even where clear and sensible rules to control environmental impacts exist (such as the Farming Rules for Water) there has been [a lack of awareness of them and insufficient resources](#) to allow them to be properly enforced.

This is not an easy problem to solve. Defra's Plan for Water recognises these challenges and proposes further work to consider options, including the future of River Basin Management Plans. We believe the regional groups can add value to the discussion and potentially test possible new approaches. WRE is in essence a regional-scale catchment partnership that already represents and works across sector and organisational boundaries to develop plans that meet a clear environmental need.

Our governance model already includes important features such as an independent chair, with board members drawn from across relevant sectors, that is able to provide a degree of independent challenge and assurance of plans and delivery against agreed milestones and targets.

As discussed earlier, we believe the logical first step in this process is to try to bring together consideration of both water resources and environmental water quality challenges when working with partners at the catchment and water body scales. This should include a role to promote the potential for catchment and nature-based solutions to achieve multiple objectives, including for nature and carbon sequestration.

For example, when considering the type and location of catchment and nature-based solutions, this should be done in close coordination with flood risk management authorities and Regional Flood and Coastal Committees who may be developing their own plans for upstream natural flood management schemes and retrofitting Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) in urban areas.

### Early actions under this priority include:

- In taking forward the Norfolk Water Strategy Programme and other projects, we will continue to assess the potential for **land use change and nature-based approaches** to deliver integrated water management benefits. Our detailed modelling in the Wensum and Bure catchments shows the potential for runoff attenuation and infiltration schemes, new wetlands, and regenerative farming to improve drought resilience, restore catchments, reduce downstream flood risks, and address nutrient loads in waterbodies.
- **Champion opportunities to deliver wider public value** for communities and the region from the major infrastructure schemes in our plan. This should include seeing if these investments could support the needs of other sectors particularly agriculture, and improve environmental and amenity value, by the way in which they are designed and integrated into the landscape and interface with existing local water management infrastructure.

### During the 2024 – 2028 period, we propose to:

- Work to break down silos within and between organisations focusing on inter-connected elements of **water and environmental land management**, including the way in which different objectives are valued and funded.
- Work more closely with the three Regional Flood and Coastal Committees and other risk management authorities in the region to **coordinate investment in catchment and nature-based solutions**.
- Develop and test models that show how **stronger governance and assurance of integrated water management** could be achieved, in line with the aspirations contained in Defra's Plan for Water.



# STRATEGIC PRIORITY



**Continue to strengthen  
WRE's governance and  
funding.**

## Measures of success for this priority:

- WRE funded to achieve its vision and multi-sector planning ambitions
- WRE's board continues to have strong sector and geographic representation and improving gender and ethnic diversity

Our continuing success depends on good governance and the ability to secure the funding we need to strengthen the team and fulfil our aims. Falling short of this would quickly undermine our legitimacy and reputation with both national and regional stakeholders. The Board, Nominations & Remuneration Committee and Audit & Risk Committee therefore spend considerable time reviewing our governance and seek to improve it on a continuing basis.

Securing sufficient funding for our work to sustain and build the team is clearly an important risk on our register. As discussed above, we would like to move to a more sustainable source of income to meet our core costs, and to secure new income to fund an ongoing programme of work to build capacity and support water resources planning within other sectors including agriculture, energy, navigation, local councils and environmental sectors.

## Early actions under this priority include:

- Look to **secure new sources of core funding** and taking on board the recommendations arising from the review of governance now underway for all regional groups.
- Include a **propriety and regularity statement** in our Director's Report to the AGM, to set out how we believe we meet the highest standards of good governance.
- Inform government and regulatory thinking on the future of regional planning as they develop the next **National Framework for Water Resources**.

## During the 2024 – 2028 period, we propose to:

- **Publish annual progress reports** that review what we have achieved under each of the strategic priorities in this business plan against the measures of success. This will be presented at each AGM.
- Continue to **play an active role in national-scale forums** such as the National Framework Senior Steering Group, Regional Co-ordination Group, Regional Chairs' Group, and National Drought Group.
- Continue with current **key cross-sector forums** including our Strategic Advisory Group, Technical Delivery Group and Drought Group. We will focus in particular on strengthening our relationship with abstractor groups as we work together to identify new local resource options as part of their agriculture water resource management plans, supported by the multi-sector analysis and datasets arising from the Environmental Destination investigations.
- Aim to **generate an appropriate surplus from WRE's projects and technical studies** to build financial resilience, support pro-bono activity, and reinvest in our mission for the benefit of all stakeholders and interests in the region.
- **Move to appointing board members based on skills and experience**, rather than funding contributions, to further strengthen our sector and geographic representation and diversity, as and when a source of funding to replace principal membership fees is secured.



## NEXT STEPS

The diagram on the following page provides a high-level overview of the key external milestones that will inform and influence our work over the next five years. It also sets out the priority studies and workstreams we currently propose to take forward as part of developing our next regional plan.

We hope discussions with government conclude soon on how the non-public water supply aspects of regional planning will be funded so that these can be worked up together with relevant sector stakeholders and taken forward as soon as possible.

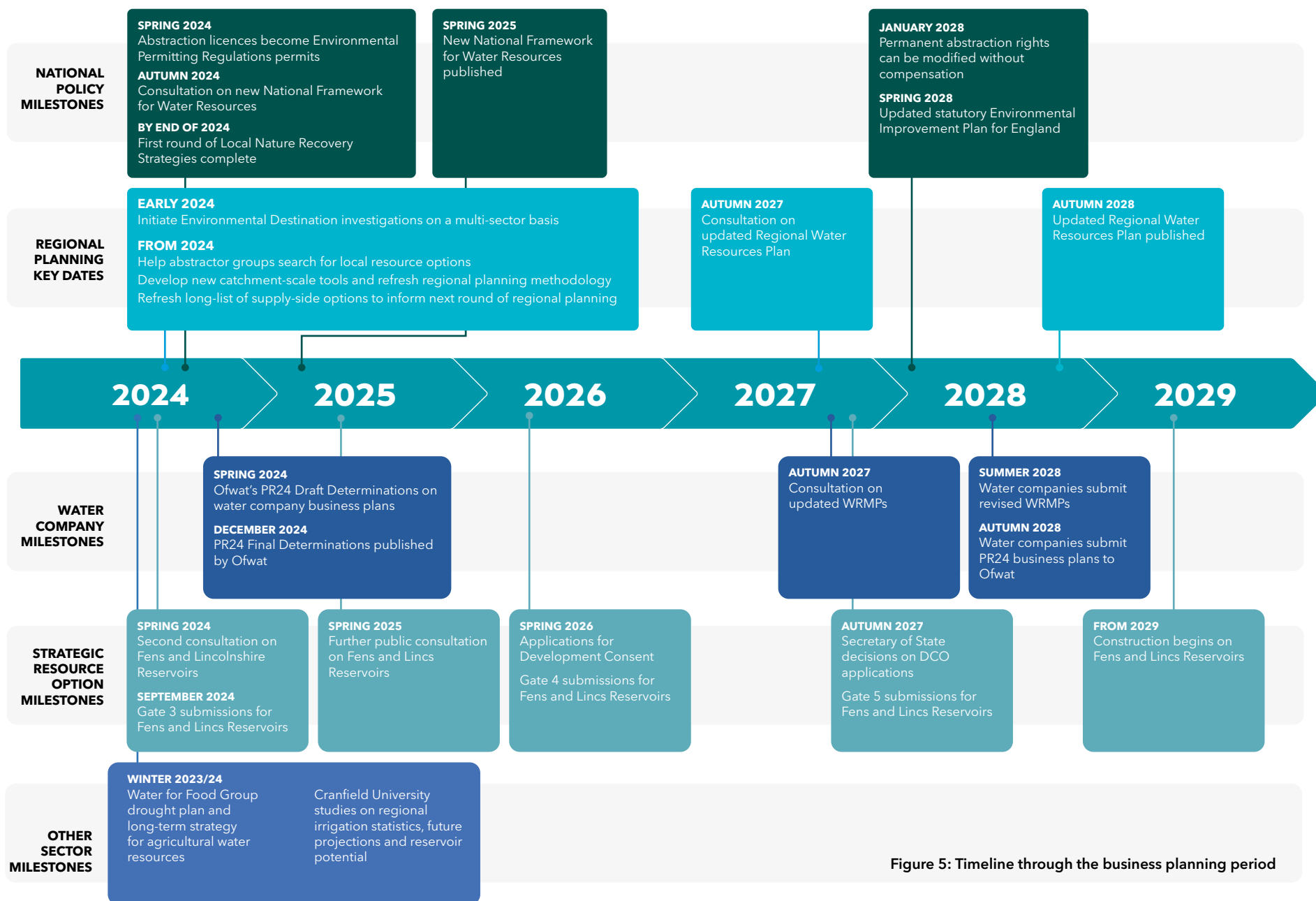


Figure 5: Timeline through the business planning period



## **ANNEX: HOW WE HAVE DELIVERED AGAINST OUR PREVIOUS STRATEGIC PRIORITIES**



WRE's previous business plan for the 2020 to 2023 period also set five strategic priorities – the five priorities in this new business plan are an evolution of these.

Since the last business plan was published in 2020, the Board has routinely reviewed progress against the previous set of priorities and the underlying actions the business plan contained. At the time of publication, we have made the following progress against the priorities we set for ourselves three years ago. We believe we have achieved all these priorities, though in each case there is more work to do.

### STRATEGIC PRIORITY

1

**Produce the Regional Plan, meeting National Framework requirements.**

#### Achieved

- WRE consulted on its Emerging Plan in January 2023, and launched its draft Regional Plan in November 2022. The final Regional Plan is due for publication in December 2023.
- An annex to the regional plan describes how we have met each of the requirements of the first National Framework.
- An Environment Agency [review of draft Regional Plans](#) published in September 2023 considered them "...a pivotal moment in how England's water resources are secured." Whilst recognising that there was significant further work to be done, the report said the draft plans "...are a critical step to ensuring that the nation has secure, sustainable water supplies that protect and enhance the environment."



### STRATEGIC PRIORITY

2

**Deliver a series of flagship pilot projects across the region.**

#### Achieved

- Our Water for Tomorrow project in partnership with the Rivers Trust and the Environment Agency drew to a close in spring 2023, ending with a well-attended conference. Lessons are being fed into our future catchment-scale water resources work.
- The Norfolk Water Strategy Programme is moving into an exciting 'launch and scale' phase, funded by Anglian Water and Norfolk County Council. This will deliver a number of demonstration projects including to validate groundwater infiltration models by installing runoff attenuation features in the Wensum catchment with long-term monitoring equipment.
- Studies demonstrating the water resources and flood risk management opportunities arising from the Bedford to Milton Keynes Waterway Park have been published. These were commissioned by WRE with funding from the Environment Agency and Anglian Water.
- The Essex Water Strategy is due to be launched in March 2024 following a two-year inward secondment from Essex County Council.

### STRATEGIC PRIORITY

3

**Continue to increase engagement and membership of Water Resources East.**

#### Achieved

- WRE's membership has grown significantly in recent years with further members joining in 2022. The current total membership stands at over 180.
- An open call for new non-executive members of WRE's board was launched in May 2023. This resulted in Kathryn Mackenzie being appointed as a second stakeholder director, and Paul Mumford on behalf of Urban&Civic being appointed as a new principal funding member.
- We have continued to organise quarterly meetings of the Strategic Advisory Group to seek members' input on the regional plan and our flagship projects, and to seek feedback on our new business plan.
- We began a new quarterly newsletter in January 2023 to provide updates to our membership on the latest developments in water and environmental management projects and policy relevant to the region.

### STRATEGIC PRIORITY

4

**Provide quality assured, academically rigorous evidence, and work with regulators and government to shape water management policy.**

#### Achieved

- WRE continues to work with leading academics and consultancies to develop the tools that allow multi-sector water resources planning at both the regional and catchment scales.
- We have helped shape future government policy in a number of ways, including by taking part in informal and formal consultation processes, and being a member of the National Framework for Water Resources Senior Steering Group, Regional Coordination Group, and National Drought Group. WRE has also taken part in important policy reviews such as the Lowland Agricultural Peat Task Force and Senior Water Demand Reduction Group.
- In particular, we believe we have played an important role in helping to highlight the importance of water resources planning for agriculture as part of our multi-sector plan and the steps that government and regulators can take to support this. We were pleased to see Ministers commit to resourcing this at the UK Farm to Fork summit in May 2023.
- We use a 'three lines of assurance' approach to make sure all data and outputs meet the highest standards of academic rigour. The draft and final Regional Plans have been subject to external assurance by the engineering consultancy Jacobs, and via an independent Integrated Environmental Assessment process.

### STRATEGIC PRIORITY

5

**Develop a long-term strategy for Water Resources East beyond 2023.**

#### Achieved

- We surveyed our members in June 2022 to gather feedback on our current and future aims and priorities. This informed a strategy session with Board members in July 2022. The Board discussed future strategy again in December 2022 and twice in 2023 as part of agreeing this business plan.
- In January 2023, the government and regulators wrote to regional groups to announce there will be a second round of regional planning, confirming the future of the regional groups beyond 2023.
- The Environment Agency has commissioned three studies to help shape the next National Framework for Water Resources, which itself is due for consultation in 2024 and publication in spring 2025.
- This refreshed business plan for 2024-2028 will be reviewed again in light of the new National Framework and the governance and funding studies mentioned above.



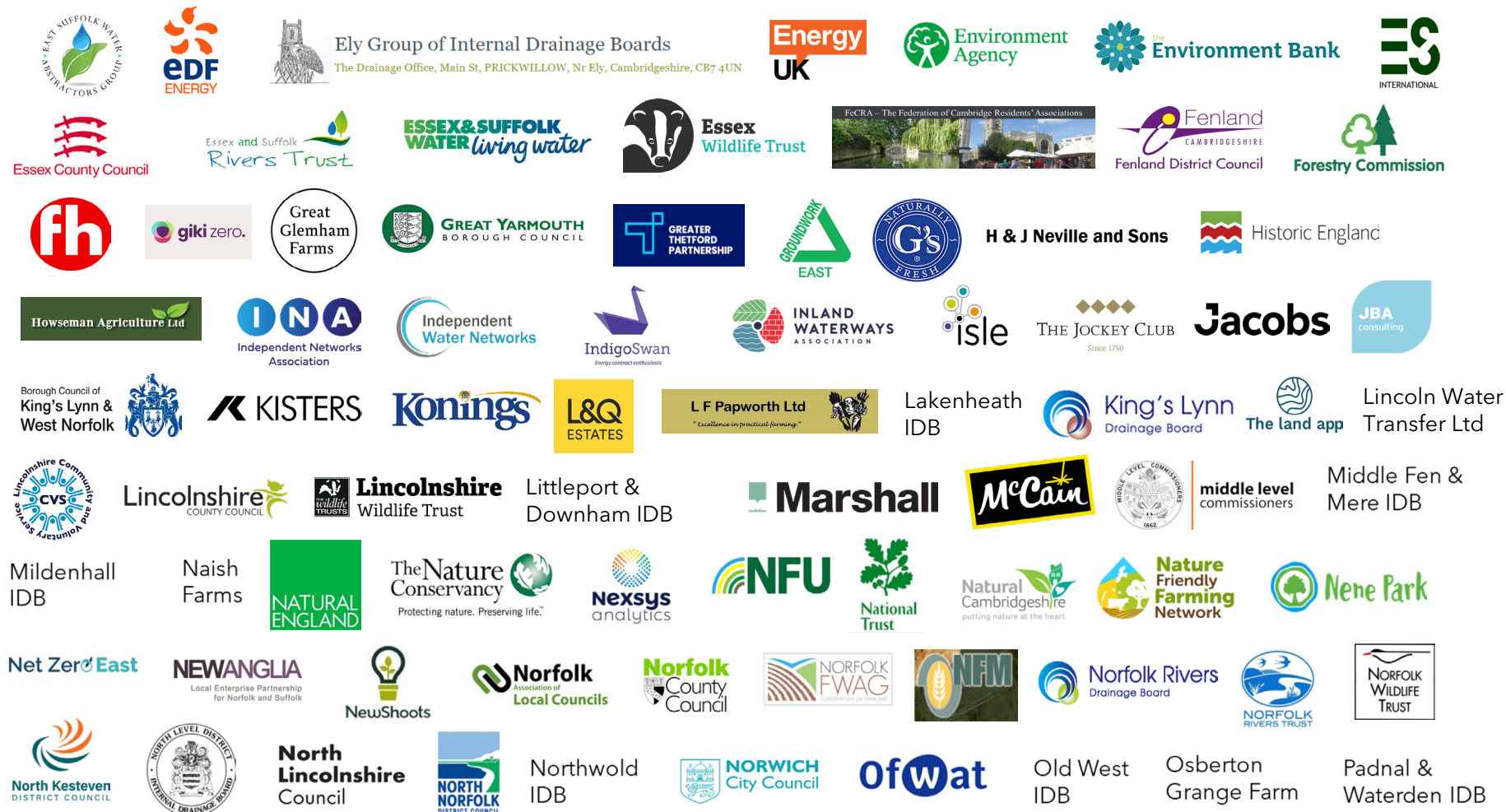
# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all our members and stakeholders for your continuing support as we move forward into the next exciting phase.

## Members and stakeholders



## Members and stakeholders





## Members and stakeholders







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