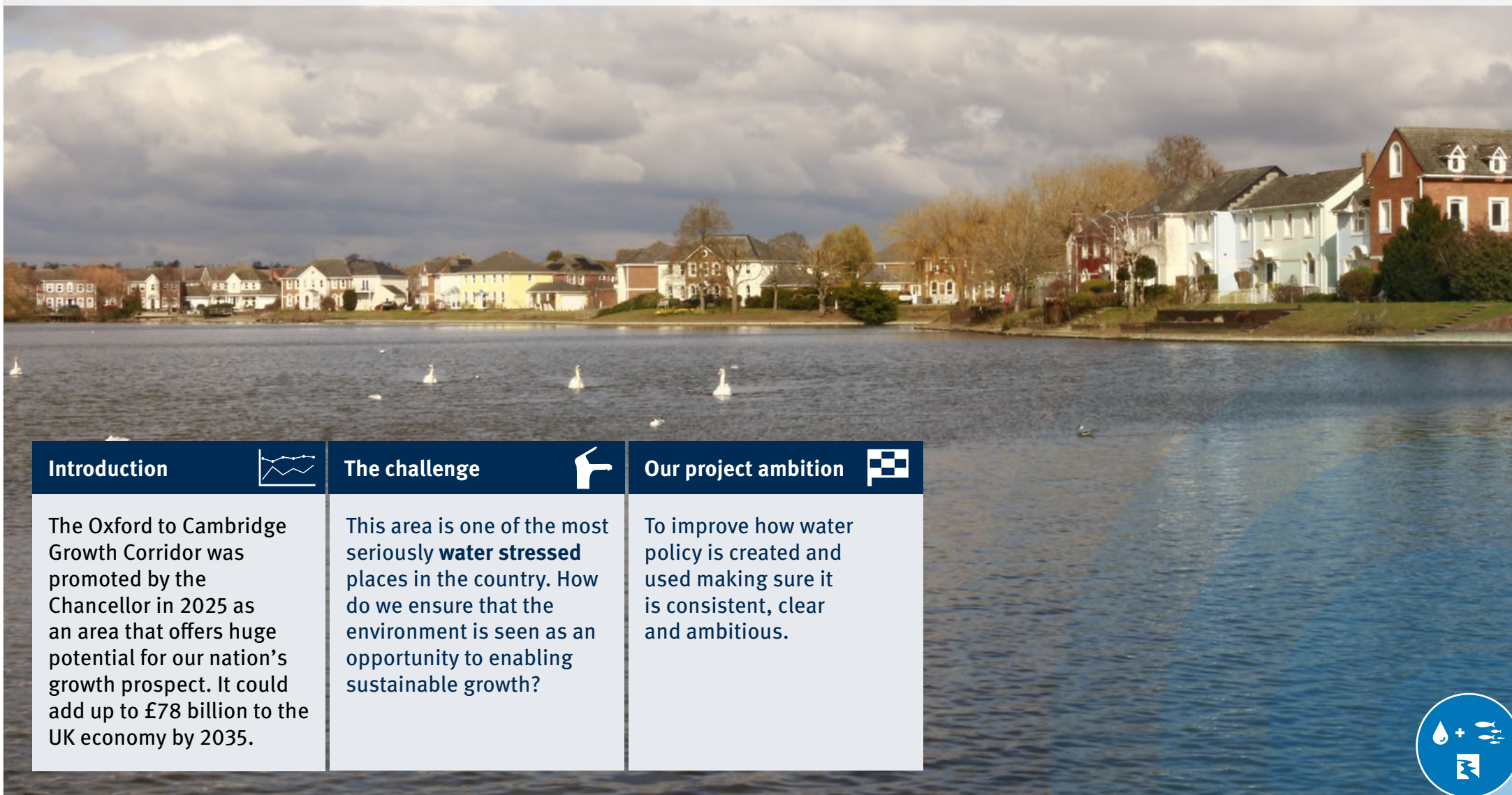


Oxford to Cambridge



Integrated Water Management Framework

# Maximising planning for water



## Introduction



The Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor was promoted by the Chancellor in 2025 as an area that offers huge potential for our nation's growth prospect. It could add up to £78 billion to the UK economy by 2035.

## The challenge



This area is one of the most seriously **water stressed** places in the country. How do we ensure that the environment is seen as an opportunity to enabling sustainable growth?

## Our project ambition



To improve how water policy is created and used making sure it is consistent, clear and ambitious.



Project Aims

<h3>To explore</h3> <p>How water is already considered in the planning system? Could local plans do more for the water system?</p>	<h3>To create</h3> <p>Products to help build capability and knowledge across planning professionals to ensure water challenges and opportunities are thought about early.</p> <p>To enable planning professionals to work with developers and infrastructure providers, ensuring that water is included early in the design of local plans and planning policy.</p>	<h3>To learn</h3> <p>To advise on improvements to Environment Agency guidance.</p> <p>How to improve the planning process to benefit everyone.</p>
--	---	--

#### Challenges and facts

Across the area there are **20** Local Planning Authorities – fast paced growth is planned across the region

There are significant water supply pressures in the area. The supply of water and treatment of wastewater is managed by **4** separate companies

**9,500** There were 9,500 sewage storm overflow events recorded across the geography in 2020

**25%** of the land area is currently at risk of flooding with annual damages estimated at £1.06 billion

#### Background information

The **National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)** outlines the overarching policy and provides guidance on how to use it. While the planning system aims to ensure consistency, it allows for interpretation. This is for planning officers to consider factors, such as the characteristics of the area, local views and how robust the evidence is, both when developing policies and making decisions on planning applications. The planning system can be complex when putting it into practice.

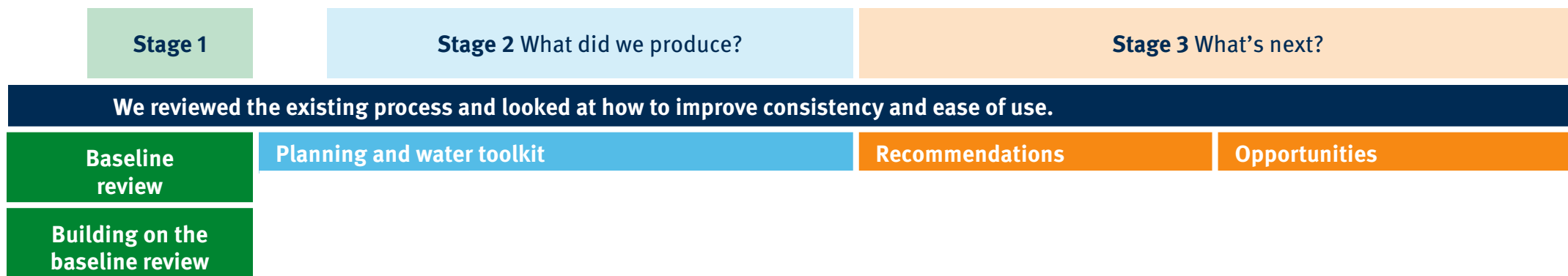
The **Planning Practice Guidance (PPG)** supports the NPPF, offering detailed information on specific policy areas, including the 4 water disciplines as shown in the diagram. The water environment includes fish, plant species, and flow as described in the Water Framework Directive.

Additionally, many plans, strategies, and policy documents related to the

4 water disciplines are produced by various organisations at different spatial scales. Planners are expected to review and understand these documents, but it is not always clear to what extent they are aware of these and how they can use them. Evidence and professional organisations play a crucial role in the successful development and application of planning policy, influencing the outcomes of planning decisions.

The diagram shows a circular flow of four water disciplines: flood risk (house icon), water quality (water drop icon), water resources (faucet icon), and water environment (fish and reeds icon). A central text box says 'The 4 water disciplines' with a plus sign to the right.

## Project stages



### Engagement was integral throughout the study

#### Who we worked with

We, the Oxford to Cambridge team at the **Environment Agency**, worked with Eunomia and Land Use Consultants (LUC). We were supported by the **Planning Advisory Service** and **planning professionals** in the Environment Agency.

Our local partners were

- **West Oxfordshire District Council**
- **Milton Keynes City Council**
- **Greater Cambridge Shared Planning team**, made of
  - Cambridge City Council
  - South Cambridgeshire District Council

What do planning professionals think about water and the planning system?



#### What did we do?

We used a survey and workshops to explore how water challenges are included in spatial plans when developing and implementing policy.

#### We explored

What supports and what constrains the integration of water challenges in planning policy.

What relationships and policies work well and where can improvements be introduced.



Engagement, survey approach and detailed summary of responses



Engagement

Making it easier for planning authorities to find opportunities for water we created guidance in the form of a planning and water toolkit.



## Stage 1 Baseline review

## Stage 2

## Stage 3

We reviewed the existing process and looked at how to improve consistency and ease of use.

### Baseline review



#### We reviewed:

- guidance documents
- local plans
- planning policies



#### We found it is important to:

- use a wide range of evidence
- work closely with partners
- align policies
- use best practice in policy development



#### We produced reflections on:

- evidence base
- stakeholder engagement
- local plans

### Building on the baseline review

Building on our findings from stage 1, we focused on our 3 partner local authorities.



We considered 2 parts of local planning:

- Policy development
- Development management

We also looked at partnership working

### Planning and water toolkit

### Opportunities



Policy baseline review



Building on the baseline review  
Analysis: Water in planning policies and their application





We reviewed the existing process and looked at how to improve consistency and ease of use.

## Baseline review

## Building on the baseline review

## Planning and water toolkit

## Opportunities




### How to use the toolkit



#### What you will find

-  Practical advice
-  Resources
-  Pre-application checklist
-  Technical notes including “good example policies” and conditions

#### You can access 2 main elements on the toolkit

-  Policy development and development management for the 4 water disciplines.

#### Further resources to support your use of the toolkit

-  Written user guide
-  Instructional video

The planning and water toolkit has been designed to support Local planning authority planning specialists in considering water within their role. The toolkit aims to help local planning authorities achieve better outcomes for water through the planning system.

It also seeks to streamline the planning process by providing clear guidance to prevent water-related issues from slowing down decisions.

It will do this by providing prompts and direction so that water can be thought about early, discussed and planned for upfront.

### Where in the country is this toolkit used?

We created the toolkit based on evidence collected between 2023 and 2024 from the Oxford to Cambridge area. The toolkit could be used by other Local Authorities across England, with the understanding that there may be some gaps for these locations. When using the toolkit please remember that local planning policy and the wider policy context are constantly evolving.



We reviewed the existing process and looked at how to improve consistency and ease of use.

## Baseline review

## Planning and water toolkit

## Our recommendations

## What's next

### 23 recommendations for local planning authorities



These recommendations aim to get the most from their influence on water management through planning practices such as:

- improving how validation checklists are shared with applicants
- establishing ways to make sure applicants are updated on any changes after the local plan is adopted

**Want to discuss something?**  
Contact the team

**Want to learn more?** Reporting – key opportunities

### 12 recommendations for other organisations

These recommendations will help other organisations to influence water management through planning practices and enable them to support Local Planning Authorities.

#### These recommendations included:

- providing clearer national policy guidance
- exploring funding to develop evidence
- enhancing engagement between plan authors, experts and local planning authorities

#### Organisations could include:

- Environment Agency
- Lead Local Flood Authorities
- Water and sewerage companies
- Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

Reporting – key recommendations

### 12 opportunities to build on this work



Address key evidence gaps and barriers which may limit local planning authorities' ability to improve water management.

#### Opportunities are based around these themes

- the role of water stakeholders
- how strategic plans complement each other
- the effectiveness of supplementary planning documents
- the effectiveness of neighbourhood planning
- best practice examples of planning policies on integrated water management and integrated water management approaches for specific development types
- improved guidance
- cross boundary collaboration
- monitoring and linked evidence-base including for water efficiency
- quantitate data on groundwater flooding