

Ambitions of the Water Sector – Enabling Factors

Our water services of tomorrow – Let's make change happen

The water services sector has the ambition to play a front-running role in Europe's journey to building climate-neutral, circular, smart and resilient society. To achieve this, water services will work with local and EU level policy makers to maximise the latest innovative technologies and practices, by digitalising their operations, exploiting their full energy efficiency and renewable energy generation potentials, and recovering nutrients and materials from waste water streams and drinking water treatment.

As part of this transformation, we can make a significant contribution to accelerating Europe's energy transition and in overcoming the most polluting energy sources. We can provide reclaimed water for irrigation, industrial uses and aquifer recharge. Moreover, we can play a major role in closing phosphorus, nitrogen and carbon cycles, and recover cellulose, bioplastics and other materials. In short, we are transforming our wastewater treatment plants into resource recovery plants.

And all of this, while ensuring our drinking water remains healthy and safe, and wastewater is treated to a level that does not harm public health and the environment, 24 hours a day and at an affordable price.

Our vision

Our vision for the future of Europe's water heritage is one where our rivers and lakes are among the cleanest in the world, where there is enough safe water for all uses, where society handles its water with care so that only minimal treatment is carried out, where drinking and waste water services are professionally and efficiently delivered and water operators play a front-runner role on our journey towards sustainable societies.

Science and media headlines show this is not an easy undertaking for a sector that is facing multiple other challenges. Droughts, heavy rain storms, rising sea levels, hazardous and persistent chemicals in the urban water cycle and new security challenges require far-reaching adaptation measures. Despite all these challenges we remain convinced of our ambitions while increasing our resilience.

While water service providers from across the continent share this vision and ambition, the capacity to achieve progress and the speed of this progress differ substantially between European countries and also between regions.

So what are the success factors that European and national authorities must ensure are in place to make effective and positive change happen?



Putting success factors in place

Water services are considered essential for society and therefore rightly subject to strict regulations and surveillance. This means that, to succeed, we must work hand in hand with regulators, municipalities, other water users and consumers to raise the wider understanding of our potentials and put the necessary framework conditions in place. These are the five success factors we must achieve to set the sector on the path to change. They are accompanied by short check-lists for regulators and policy makers.

1. Enabling regulatory framework

European and national legislation must be robust and ensure good governance. Furthermore, it must enable and facilitate change by setting the right incentives and targets, stimulate innovation and encourage the development of new business areas relating to activities such as energy production and storage, and nutrient and raw material recovery in line with the European Green Deal objectives.

Our mission

We strive to provide safe, resilient and sustainable water services to society that protect people and the environment today and in the future.

To achieve this, water services need a strong voice in policy making. The European Commission should appoint a vice-president in charge of water. Member States should ensure a strong and effective coordination of all water-related topics throughout all administrative levels.

Checklist

- ✓ Does legislation encourage operators to increase resilience to security and climate change-related threats?
- ✓ Does legislation encourage the integration of water service providers in energy markets in terms of supplying green energy, buffering peak demand and providing energy storage capacity?
- ✓ Does legislation encourage water, material and nutrient recycling and recovery and support their market uptake to meet societal demand?

The rules governing the water sector must be adapted to new challenges and opportunities.



2. Ensuring long-term funding and resources

Without proper funding, many of the ambitions will remain out of reach. Full cost recovery, including for the maintenance and renewal of the existing infrastructure, research and innovation, investment and the development of new business areas must be ensured. This should include tariffs that reflect the value of water services, increased EU and national funding, and the full implementation of the polluter-pays principle, including through extended producer responsibility.

Checklist

- ✓ Is the short- and long-term income of water service providers (tariffs, taxes, transfers) sufficient to achieve our goals and ambitions?

Full cost recovery is a prerequisite for sustainable progress.

- ✓ Is the Polluter Pays Principle widely implemented to cover the cost of removing pollutants from raw drinking water and wastewater, if control-at-source measures are insufficient?
- ✓ Are social policy measures in place to guarantee access to water and sanitation services for the most vulnerable groups?
- ✓ Does the economic regulation guarantee adequate resources to invest in the renewal, improvement and development of infrastructures and in research and development?

3. Attracting a competent workforce and obtaining societal recognition

People are the drivers of change. However, water service providers across Europe face serious and growing shortages of qualified people ranging from blue-collar workers to IT experts to engineers. National authorities, water service providers and education facilities should determine future skills needs, develop appropriate training programmes and promote them towards the public if we are to fill the growing number of vacancies expected for the years to come. Water services are largely invisible to citizens and their complexity is often poorly understood. Water service providers and public authorities must better explain the value of well-functioning and resilient water services for society to attract motivated employees, and obtain the support of people and policy makers for necessary investments. People who respect water as a precious resource will use it carefully and minimise avoidable pollution.

An attractive working environment is a must if we want to bring motivated people to the sector.

Checklist

- ✓ Have the future skills needs for water services been defined?
- ✓ Are education and training including apprenticeships curricula adapted to meet these needs?



- ✓ Can the water services sector offer attractive conditions to their potential colleagues?
- ✓ Is the communication of authorities and service providers effectively increasing citizens' understanding of the value of water services, starting from childhood, including through campaigns to promote the quality and availability of tap water?

4. Developing innovative solutions and increasing motivation to change

Water services have changed substantially over the past decades. Still, many of the solutions we apply today are energy- and resource-intensive. Innovation is needed to meet the Green Deal and SDG ambitions. All areas should be covered, ranging from digitalisation to artificial intelligence and from nature-based solutions to communication. Embracing change can be challenging as numerous operators, in particular smaller ones, struggle to cope with day-to-day problems such as ageing infrastructure, non-compliance with current rules and lack of skilled people. Water service associations and authorities must jointly engage in a dialogue with all operators to ensure that ambitions translate into concrete solutions tailored to each situation.

Checklist

- ✓ Does the legislation encourage innovation, i.e. are water service providers enabled to finance research and the implementation of innovative solutions?
- ✓ Are the right structures (knowledge platforms, research networks etc.) in place to accompany them?
- ✓ Are (potential) sector employees trained to develop and introduce innovative solutions and do they find a culture in the water service providers that encourages sustainability and resilience?
- ✓ Is the regulatory framework flexible enough to allow all categories of service providers to progress?
- ✓ Does policy support capacity building particularly among smaller operators?

5. Avoiding pollution at the source

Preventing the release of contaminants to drinking water resources and wastewater is the most effective way to ensure the sustainability of water services. The removal of pollutants such as nitrate, pesticides or PFAS significantly increases the carbon footprint, resource use and energy consumption of water service providers while generating difficult-to-treat waste and limiting circular economy options.

Checklist

- ✓ Are effective measures in place to protect drinking water resources from point source or diffuse pollution



- ✓ Are effective measures in place to prevent hazardous and persistent contaminants from entering the wastewater network from e.g. connected industries, leachate from landfill sites and consumer products (such as PFAS)?

We are ready to make this vision a reality. What will your role in this future be?



About EurEau

EurEau represents Europe's drinking and waste water sector. We encompass 37 national water services associations including public and private operators from 32 countries.

Together we promote access to safe and reliable water services for Europe's citizens and businesses, the management of water quality and resource efficiency through effective environmental protection.



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