

# Frequently Asked Questions

## Early Adopter & Fast Followers Stream

### **What is the significance of the “trial period”?**

The initial launch of our ambitious new Water Innovation Implementation Programme is being run as a trial between January 2026 and March 2027. During this period, we want to remain open and flexible in our approach – learning from early activity, gathering feedback and using this insight to refine how the Programme operates so that it can better support innovation implementation in future.

### **Can I apply for funding to implement an innovation that hasn't previously been tested through another Ofwat Innovation Fund programme?**

Yes.

The Programme is open to companies looking to implement innovations that have been developed or tested through any previous activity as long as the solution has been proven through rigorous testing in a relevant environment and is being implemented in a way that has yet to be achieved by Water Companies in England and Wales.

If you are looking for funding to develop or test a new innovation, you may wish to consider other routes such as the Water Breakthrough Challenge, Water Discovery Challenge or Water Efficiency Lab.

### **What is the difference between an Early Adopter and a Fast Follower?**

Early Adopters are water companies that lead the first implementation of a proven innovation under the Programme, generating practical learning and evidence in a real-world context.

Fast Followers are water companies that subsequently implement the same innovation in their own context, drawing on the Early Adopter's experience to accelerate and de-risk adoption.

Each funded project will involve one Early Adopter and a cohort of at least two Fast Followers.

### **Can my company be an Early Adopter more than once?**

During the trial period, each eligible water company may only receive Early Adopter funding for one project.

But you may submit Expressions of Interest for more than one innovation and may participate as a Fast Follower in multiple projects where Programme requirements are met. There is no limit on the number of times a company can be a Fast Follower.

### **Is there any additional support for smaller water companies?**

Yes.

To support equitable access, two Fast Follower places per project will be reserved (where there is interest) for water companies serving fewer than 3 million customers, provided they meet the Programme's eligibility and quality requirements.

This reflects the differences in capacity across organisations and is intended to help ensure that smaller companies can adopt a Fast Follower approach, where they may not have the capacity to lead an Early Adopter implementation.

### **How much funding can I apply for?**

Early Adopter and Fast Follower applicants can request between £100,000 and £1 million in match-funding per project. Funding is provided on a 50:50 basis, with the Programme covering up to 50% of total eligible project costs.

Across all participants, there is a £5 million cap in total Programme match-funding per innovation (covering the Early Adopter and all Fast Followers combined). The Early Adopter may also request up to £50,000 of additional funding to support the Fast Follower cohort (for example, through training, shared resources and implementation support).

### **What types of costs can the funding cover?**

Funding can support a range of eligible implementation costs, which may include:

- Design, engineering and configuration work needed to deploy the innovation
- Capital expenditure and site modifications directly related to implementation
- Staff time, specialist consultancy and technical support
- Training, change management and adoption activities
- Monitoring, evaluation and knowledge-sharing activities

Full details of eligible and ineligible costs are provided in the [Applicant Handbook](#).

### **Where can my match-funding contribution come from?**

The Programme provides funding on a match-funded basis, covering up to 50% of total eligible project costs. The remaining costs must be met by the applicant, for example through:

- Internal company funds (regulated and non-regulated)
- Other non-Ofwat sources of funding
- In-kind contributions

You cannot use funding from other Ofwat Innovation Fund competitions as match-funding for this Programme.

### **How does the £5 million cap per innovation work in practice?**

The £5 million cap applies to the total match-funding that the Programme can provide for a single innovation across the Early Adopter and all Fast Followers.

For example, if an Early Adopter receives £1 million in Programme funding to implement "Innovation A", the combined funding awarded to all Fast Followers implementing the same

innovation cannot exceed £4 million, so that the total remains within the £5 million cap (excluding up to £50,000 of additional support funding for the Early Adopter to support the Fast Follower cohort).

### **When is the Early Adopter & Fast Follower stream open for applications?**

The stream is expected to remain continuously open for Early Adopter applications from 26 January 2026.

Ofwat may, close or pause the stream earlier if required – for example, in response to demand, available funding or learning from the trial phase.

Fast Follower application windows will open after specific Early Adopter proposals have passed initial screening and have been shared with other water companies.

### **What is an Implementation Representative?**

Each eligible water company must nominate a single Implementation Representative as their main point of contact for the Programme.

Implementation Representatives will:

- Receive information about approved Early Adopter proposals
- Coordinate internal discussions on whether to Fast Follow particular innovations
- Attend Implementation Review Forums where the pipeline, portfolio balance and learning are discussed

Details on how to register an Implementation Representative are provided in the [Applicant Handbook](#).

### **Can I use this stream to extend or finish work on an existing Ofwat Innovation Fund project?**

No.

The Early Adopter & Fast Follower stream is for implementation of innovations that have already been developed or tested. It is not intended to fund the completion of Research & Development, trials or pilots that are still in progress.

If your original project has not yet finished, you should consider whether the remaining work is better suited to your existing funding or to other Ofwat Water Innovation Fund competitions in future.

### **How will intellectual property (IPR) be treated?**

It is not generally expected that implementation projects will generate substantial new intellectual property rights (IPR). Where they do, any new IPR created through the Programme must comply with the terms laid out in the [Terms & Conditions](#) to ensure all Water Companies in England and Wales have fair and equal access to IP generated through funded activity.

As part of the application, you will be asked to:

- Confirm that you can comply with the IPR terms as outlined in the Programme [Terms & Conditions](#); and
- Explain how you will handle any new IPR developed as part of the funded activity.

Further information is set out in the Programme [Terms and Conditions](#) and the [Applicant Handbook](#).

### **Will details of successful Early Adopter & Fast Follower applications be shared?**

Yes. Once funding has been awarded, we will publish information about the successful Early Adopter & Fast Follower projects, including the innovation being implemented and the companies involved.

We will not publish detailed application content such as full business cases or other commercially sensitive information submitted in response to assessed questions. Any information shared publicly will be proportionate and focused on supporting transparency, learning and awareness across the sector.

### **Will the learning from completed Early Adopter & Fast Follower projects be shared?**

Yes. Learning will be captured throughout implementation and after project completion, in a way that is proportionate to the scale and nature of each project. We will work with lead companies to synthesise and share key insights, including what worked well, what was challenging and what others should consider when implementing similar solutions.

This may include summary reports, case studies, webinars or other knowledge-sharing outputs, so that the benefits of funded projects extend beyond the participating companies and support wider adoption across the sector.

## **Implementation Enablers stream**

### **What are “barriers to implementation”?**

Innovation in the water sector rarely follows a straightforward path from idea to implementation. Even the most promising technologies, management practices or business models must navigate a complex landscape of institutional, technical, financial and cultural constraints. Many other sectors face the same challenges.

These constraints – often described collectively as “barriers to implementation” – do not necessarily imply resistance to change but reflect the many interdependent factors that shape how innovation emerges, is tested and ultimately adopted.

The Water Innovation Implementation Programme aims to support approaches that address these barriers, creating the conditions in which innovation implementation can thrive.

### **Can I take part in the Implementation Enablers stream if I haven’t been involved in the Innovation Fund previously?**

Yes.

The Implementation Enablers stream has been designed as a collaborative, flexible stream to support activities that address barriers across a wide range of challenge areas in the sector.

You do not need to have led or participated in a previous Ofwat Water Innovation Fund project to be involved in Enabler activities such as sprints, workshops or calls to industry.

### **When are the next rounds of Implementation Enablers activity?**

We expect to deliver at least one round of Enabler activity per year throughout the Water Innovation Implementation Programme, which runs to 2030.

Because the Programme is being run as a flexible trial, the actual of Enabler activities may be higher or lower in a given year, depending on the nature and urgency of the barriers being addressed and the scale of the solutions required.

### **How can I get involved in the Implementation Enablers stream?**

Throughout the Programme there will be a range of opportunities to get involved in the Implementation Enablers stream. We are keen to hear perspectives, learning and ideas from across the water sector and beyond.

This will include solution identification and development activities – such as sprints, workshops and calls to industry – to explore how best to address prioritised implementation barriers. You can stay updated via the [Ofwat Water Innovation Fund website](#) and Ofwat communications such as social media channels and the Water Innovation Fund newsletter.

### **How are barriers to innovation implementation identified?**

During the design of the Water Innovation Implementation Programme, a wide range of stakeholders – including water companies, regulators, contractors, solution providers and industry experts – were engaged to build a shared understanding of the challenges facing innovation implementation in the sector. Through this process, over 200 barriers were identified across a broad range of organisational and sector themes.

Insights from the Early Adopter & Fast Follower stream, as well as from ongoing engagement with the water sector and other sectors, will continue to inform the identification and prioritisation of barriers, ensuring that the most pressing, systemic issues are tackled first.

A new Sector Implementation Committee will meet quarterly to review evidence, identify emerging issues and prioritise barriers for action.

You can contribute to the barrier identification and prioritisation process by sharing specific barriers that you or your organisation has experienced. To do this, please complete the [Barrier Identification Form](#).

### **What is the Sector Implementation Committee?**

The Sector Implementation Committee provides strategic direction for the Implementation Enablers stream. Its primary purpose is to:

- Identify the most pressing, cross-sector barriers to innovation implementation
- Prioritise these barriers for “sprint” or other targeted interventions

- Review potential solutions and recommend those that are practical, scalable and likely to deliver tangible benefits for customers and the environment

We are keen to establish a diverse pool of people who can sit on, or advise, the Sector Implementation Committee at different points throughout the year to support barrier identification, prioritisation and solution selection. We will consider members from any type of organisation but they should have a good understanding of the process for implementing innovation and the challenges that exist doing this in the water sector.

If you are interested in being considered for this pool, or would like to find out more, please contact us at [innovationimplementation@isleutilities.com](mailto:innovationimplementation@isleutilities.com).

### **How much money is available in the Implementation Enablers stream?**

Currently, £10 million has been allocated to the Implementation Enablers stream of the Water Innovation Implementation Fund. But this may be reviewed and increased as the programme progresses.

Each activity addressing a specific barrier will draw on this overall budget, with the level of funding tailored to the nature and scale of the barrier and the type of solution being taken forward.

### **Who receives the funds from the Implementation Enablers stream?**

Funding from the Implementation Enablers stream is used to support the development and deployment of solutions to prioritised barriers to innovation implementation.

The organisations receiving funding will depend on the nature of the barrier and the solution being supported.

For example, funding may go to:

- one or more water companies
- a consortium including suppliers or academic partners; or
- another suitable lead organisation, where this is judged to be the most appropriate route to designing and delivering a solution that benefits the sector as a whole.

The funding model used to allocate this support may also vary depending on the solution sought. In some cases, this may involve a competitive application process; in others, a formal tender or a more targeted commissioning approach may be used, where this is considered the most effective and proportionate way to secure the right solution for the sector.