

From Opportunity to Strategy

For many years, water recycling barely featured on the agenda in Kurzeme, Latvia's relatively wet coastal region. That began to change when a team from Kurzeme Planning Region recognised the wider potential of an urban improvement project in the town of Saldus. Instead of simply draining rainwater away, could it be captured and put to use? Climate data suggests that even in Kurzeme, reducing pressure on local drinking-water supplies will become increasingly important over time. The region's example shows how a concrete project opportunity can provide the starting point for a coherent regional water recycling strategy – and help refine it along the way.



Kurzeme Region / Latvia

The Mayor of Saldus initially had a fairly straightforward aim: to make Kalpaka Square, the town's central public space, a more attractive and enjoyable place to spend time. Plans included a fountain where children could cool off in summer, as well as more greenery to provide shade for parents and anyone else looking for a pleasant place to pause outdoors. Mayors everywhere want to make their

municipalities attractive places to live. Small towns in particular need to strengthen their appeal if they are to offer a convincing alternative to life in larger cities. Yet even at the concept stage, the Saldus project pointed beyond urban design alone. The ambition to create more blue and green infrastructure reflected a growing awareness that summers in Kurzeme are becoming hotter as a result of climate change. In the medium to long term, this could also place pressure on local water supplies. Saldus Municipality was prepared to take a pioneering role by addressing these challenges together.

A Model Case for a New Approach to Water Management

For Aija Neilande, who coordinates the WaterMan project for Kurzeme Planning Region, the initiative offered an ideal starting point. A tangible local project could be used to explore new approaches to water management, while also helping to shape a broader strategy for the planning region as a whole – with water recycling

as one of its key elements. The geographical and climate data gathered at the start of the strategy process reinforced this direction. Climate change is bringing not only more frequent periods of intense rainfall, which already cause recurring problems in places such as Kalpaka Square, but also more spells of extreme heat. The topography of Saldus adds to the challenge and is typical of the hilly Kurzeme region. The town lies in a basin, so rainwater runs down from the surrounding slopes and collects in the centre. Large volumes pass across Kalpaka Square. This made the idea of an underground storage system particularly compelling: the water could be captured, treated and used to cool the square. If a fountain and more greenery were already planned, why not make use of the rainwater that regularly arrives there in such large quantities?

These ideas first led to an initial concept and later, as one of WaterMan's local pilot measures, to a detailed feasibility study. At the same time, the Saldus case reflected many of the wider water-management challenges found across the region. It therefore provided a strong foundation for developing and refining a regional strategy for Kurzeme.

Developing Strategy Through Practice

It is worth clarifying what is meant here by a water recycling strategy. The term may suggest a linear process: first analyse and plan, then implement and scale up. Kurzeme Planning Region has taken a different approach. Planning, testing, learning and refining all form part of the same dynamic process. "This is very typical of WaterMan and of the new approach to water management in the Baltic Sea Region," explains Project Coordinator Jens Masuch. "And it is intentional."

"Given how quickly the situation is evolving, and the fact that water scarcity is not yet seen everywhere as an urgent challenge, this is exactly the right way forward. We find that regions build awareness and develop practical approaches most effectively through concrete pilot measures, feasibility studies and inspiring examples from elsewhere. These experiences then feed into the wider strategy. It is an iterative process."

The result is a highly practical approach built around a few clear principles. In Kurzeme, one of the most important is that rainwater should no longer be treated simply as something to be removed. It should be regarded as a local resource and used wherever this makes sense. Water recycling is still a relatively unfamiliar concept in Latvia. Yet the growing alternation between periods of heavy rainfall and dry weather makes rainwater an obvious place to begin. At the same time, the region is expected to remain fairly well supplied with affordable water overall in the medium to long term. This is why the regional strategy focuses first on rainwater recycling: it is accessible, cost-effective and offers a realistic route to

implementation. The aim is not to introduce every possible form of water recycling at once. Instead, the region plans to test, improve and expand one promising approach step by step. Other forms of water recycling can be considered once this readily available potential has been explored more fully.

Listening to Local Experience

Local experience plays a central role in this process. Water scarcity is not yet widely discussed as a national challenge in Latvia. Even so, municipalities and water utilities are already reporting seasonal shortages in particular places and at particular times. The Kurzeme model strategy is therefore based not only on climate data and legal analysis, but also on extensive dialogue with municipalities throughout the region. It draws on local exchange formats, an initial review of good practices and an assessment of possible funding opportunities. These observations feed directly into the strategy and help sharpen priorities at local level. “When you speak to municipalities, you hear that some parts of the region already experience water shortages at certain times during the summer,” says Aija Neilande. “We take these experiences seriously.”

Kurzeme Planning Region organised eight in-person events – one in each municipality of the region – as well as an additional online session. Each event was developed together with the municipalities and technical experts. After every workshop, an analytical article summarised the main findings and shared them with the wider public through social media and local newspapers. This helped place rainwater recycling on the agenda of relevant stakeholders across the region and build support for initial measures.

Another important milestone – and a key catalyst for the regional discussion on water recycling – was a “WaterMan on Tour” event held in April 2025. It presented examples from other countries and gave local stakeholders the opportunity to speak directly with experienced practitioners from municipalities and water utilities elsewhere in the Baltic Sea Region.

One of the key conclusions from this intensive dialogue was that rainwater infrastructure should be multifunctional. A retention basin can do more than hold back excess water. It can store water for irrigation, improve the local microclimate and be designed as a green space or play area. In future, such solutions should be incorporated more systematically into urban development and investment plans. Potential locations include schools, sports grounds, municipal depots and wastewater treatment plants. These sites could be equipped with standardised extraction points and clear information on the most suitable uses for the water collected there. Possible applications include watering green spaces, suppressing dust, cleaning streets, supplying construction sites and flushing sewers.

A Practical Resource for Municipalities

To bring water recycling into everyday regional and municipal practice, the Kurzeme strategy emphasises guidance, inspiration and practical examples. Rather than setting out a conventional action plan, it brings together a broad range of approaches from WaterMan, from Latvia and from further afield. It also includes an analysis of climate trends, legal and planning conditions, an overview of existing and planned municipal measures, and information on potential funding sources. The result is not a rigid programme, but a practical strategic resource: a collection of examples and possible approaches from which municipalities can select the solutions best suited to their needs and local conditions. At the same time, the strategy identifies regulatory gaps that will require broader political discussion at both regional and national level.

The innovative pilot measure in Saldus was naturally an important reference point throughout the strategy process. Developed in parallel within WaterMan, it provided a locally adapted and transferable concept for rainwater recycling. It also showed that municipalities in the region are already willing to design and prepare concrete measures. By moving first, Saldus has taken on a motivating role that reaches well beyond the individual project.

The Same Rainwater Can Be a Problem or a Solution

Saldus provides the clearest illustration of the thinking behind the model strategy. Even at the feasibility-study stage, it shows that the same volume of rainwater can either cause disruption or become a useful resource. The difference lies in how it is managed. The regional strategy built around this example sets out ways of incorporating concrete measures into local plans and regulations. It identifies several key requirements: a clear legal framework with standards for rainwater use and green infrastructure; the integration of rainwater-use principles into urban development, spatial planning and municipal strategies; and closer cooperation between municipalities through joint initiatives and shared learning.

Moving Forward at Several Levels

It is entirely possible that Wastewater recycling may also become relevant in Latvia at a later stage. Municipal wastewater has the advantage of being available more consistently than rainwater, making it easier to plan operations, logistics and agreements with potential users. Making this possible would require fit-for-purpose standards, clear responsibilities and, where feasible, differentiated pricing. For the time being, however, this remains a longer-term prospect in Kurzeme. The immediate priority is to bring concrete rainwater recycling

measures into practice. This includes finding the funding needed to implement the feasibility study for Kalpaka Square in Saldus.

The regional strategy also sets out ways of advancing water recycling at several levels in future, including through improvements to regulation and funding frameworks at both national and EU level. Latvian policy already supports a shift from grey to green infrastructure, while EU programmes provide funding for climate adaptation. Even so, clear standards are still lacking for water quality, permitted uses and the safe operation of such systems.

Existing infrastructure presents another challenge. It has largely been designed to drain water away, rather than retain it and make it available for use. The strategy therefore calls for greater standardisation and identifies several possible funding routes. These include municipal climate-adaptation programmes, EU structural funds for green infrastructure, national funding for nature-based solutions, and programmes supporting research, innovation and sustainable urban development.

Kurzeme shows that many of the resources needed for climate-resilient water management are already available. The key is to recognise them, use them systematically and begin with the solutions that are both practical and well suited to local conditions. Rainwater is not a waste product. It is a valuable local resource with many possible uses. Starting with cost-effective rainwater solutions creates immediate benefits as well as opportunities to learn. In this way, flood protection can become the first step towards water recycling. And a risk can become a resource.

About the WaterMan project

WaterMan promotes a region specific approach to water recycling, which intends to use the alternation of too much and too little water that has become typical in the Baltic Sea Region to make the local water supply more resilient, and supports municipalities & water companies in adapting their strategies.

More information: <https://www.eurobalt.org/WaterRecyclingToolbox/>
<http://interreg-baltic.eu/project/waterman>

Interreg
Baltic Sea Region



Co-funded by
the European Union

SUSTAINABLE WATERS



WaterMan
