Freshwater Habitats Trust

Innovation Hub

love every drop anglianwater

The Headstart project

Headwater catchments are the small catchments at the top of river systems. Their streams, ponds, ditches and wetlands are vital for biodiversity, water storage and flow buffering.

With fewer accumulated upstream pressures, these catchments offer some of our best opportunities to tackle pollution at source, restore freshwater habitats and achieve rapid biodiversity recovery.

Headstart is a cross-sector collaboration, co-led by Anglian Water and Freshwater Habitats Trust, aiming to increase the water sector's contribution to environmental recovery through strategic headwater catchment restoration.

In July 2026, Headstart entered a new, practical demonstration phase, supported by **£7.7 million from the Ofwat Water Innovation Fund**.

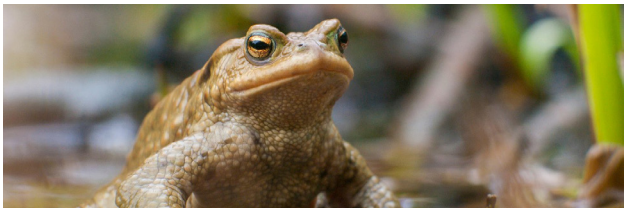
Over five years, across six demonstration sites, the project will build evidence, tools and policy support to make headwater catchment restoration business-as-usual.

Demonstrations will generate decision-grade evidence through intensive monitoring of upgrades to small wastewater treatment works and catchment-wide measures to restore freshwater habitats, increase water storage and reduce agricultural pollution.

The evidence will inform current debates on water policy reform, showing how a different approach to environmental investment could support nature recovery and help manage pressures on customer bills.

A new decision-support toolkit will help identify where headwater catchment restoration can deliver the greatest benefits, and evaluate headwater approaches alongside downstream investment in larger water company assets.

Project objectives



Establish six demonstration catchments to assess the effects of headwater catchment restoration on water quality, biodiversity and flows.



Develop decision-support tools that help water companies identify priority headwater catchments, and build the business case for investment.



Drive policy and operational change to make headwater catchment restoration business-as-usual.



Build a pipeline of future projects and practical delivery models to support sector-wide rollout.

Demonstration catchments

Demonstration headwater catchments span six water company regions, and land uses from productive lowland agriculture to protected semi-natural landscapes. Across these demonstrations, Headstart will build a nationally applicable evidence base for water-sector investment in headwater catchment restoration.

Partners	Demonstration	Catchment characteristics
Anglian Water The Allerton Project Freshwater Habitats Trust	Eye Brook, Leicestershire	Conventional Southern English farmed landscape, home to the long-running Water Friendly Farming project.
Northumbrian Water Tees Rivers Trust	Upper Leven, North Yorkshire	Mixed agriculture on the urban-upland fringe of Teesside and the Cleveland Hills.
Southern Water Freshwater Habitats Trust	Sowley Stream, New Forest	Protected landscape of heathlands, woodlands and wetlands, with some of England's highest-quality freshwaters.
Thames Water Freshwater Habitats Trust	Frilford and Marcham Brook, Oxfordshire	A typical central English mosaic of intensive agriculture with scattered woodlands and wetlands.
Wessex Water The Cranborne Estate Wessex Rivers Trust	The River Crane, Dorset	The winterbourne headwaters of a notably biodiverse chalk stream system.
Yorkshire Water Yorkshire Wildlife Trust	The Stell, North Yorkshire	Northern conventional agriculture in the Vale of Mowbray.

Outputs

Decision-support tools

Headstart will develop new tools to help the water sector target headwater interventions strategically, and build the business case for investment in headwater catchment restoration.

Spatial Decision-Support Tool

- National headwater catchment delineation
- Land use opportunity mapping
- Wastewater treatment works prioritisation

Business Case Decision-Support Tool

- Like-for-like, multiple capitals comparison of headwater catchment restoration measures and downstream asset-focused interventions

Dissemination and policy engagement

- Peer-reviewed publications and technical reports
- Headwater safaris for policymakers and investment planners
- Policy workshops and toolkit training webinars
- Annual water sector knowledge-sharing workshops

