

# Annual report 2023



water-link



# Our task is as complex as water coming out of a tap is simple.

Our ambition is to make people and technology work together so that our customers can be sure of their water supply. Discover our annual report 2023.

**R**esidential customers, industry and fellow water companies rely on water of the highest quality being available in optimal quantities every day. Water-link is responsible for 40% of the drinking water supply in Flanders, a public task we are proud of and bear with responsibility.

**Our guarantee of supply security at a particularly favourable rate is as clear as day.**

Our task is as complex as the process of water coming out of a tap is simple. Behind the scenes, we are fully committed to people, technology and sustainability. We build underground water buffers controlled by meteorological data, making the city of Antwerp climate-proof. We are increasingly reliant on data-driven processes, using sensors, via the digital water meter. We integrate live dashboarding into our processes and are shifting from reactive to proactive working.

**Our ambition is to make people and technology work together so that our customers can be sure of their water supply.**

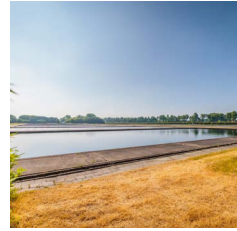
This report sets out what we have realised for our customers, how we fulfilled our social role and where we have made ongoing improvements for our industrial customers. Our sustainability report explains how we do this today and tomorrow, with respect for people, the environment and society.

Enjoy this voyage of discovery.

André Gantman  
Chairman water-link

# About water-link

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## Mission & Vision

Water security. People and businesses should always have access to the right amount of quality drinking and industrial water. As Flanders' largest water producer and supplier in the Antwerp region, water-link aims to ensure this is always the case. Today as well as tomorrow.

In order to ensure supply security, also in the long term, we offer our customised activities and services as sustainably as possible. **We create lasting value for customers, shareholders and stakeholders.**

Our strengths? Continuous innovation, technical performance and a driven customer focus. We seek partners beyond our borders and draw inspiration from our shared experiences.

Sustainability and corporate social responsibility have been the common thread of our operation for years. Our ambition is for water-link to become the trendsetter, preferred partner and preferred employer of the changing water landscape.



**"Today, almost all digital meters, some 200,000 of them, check the meter reading twice a day: that's a huge stream of data we're pulling in. The way the water-link team has dealt with this change is an achievement we are really proud of."**

**Nico Kanora, IT manager**

## Strategy

Water-link inspires everyone to make use of the power of water. We do this by continuously innovating, investing in smart partnerships, and building the team of the future.

## We innovate

- by building services around circular water use,
- by setting up smart monitoring systems,
- by providing a smooth service as a *one-stop shop*.

## We invest in smart partnerships

- by establishing synergies to increase value creation,
- by becoming a facilitator for providers of innovative water products,
- by becoming an accelerator for start-ups committed to sustainability.

## We are building the future

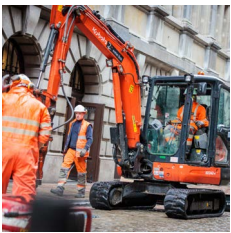
- by making processes more efficient and *data-driven* within the new structure,
- by inspiring and motivating our teams with people managers,
- and by supporting the development of our employees with training and coaching.

## Our core values

- You have to build trust.
- Innovation is the key to a sustainable future.
- Without accountability, we will not achieve goals.
- Our shared enthusiasm creates drive.

# Our activities

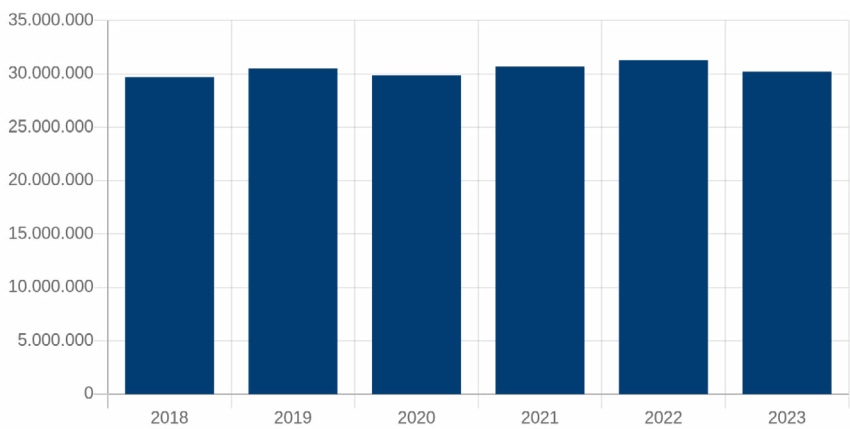
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## Domestic drinking water produce, transport, dis- tribute and deliver

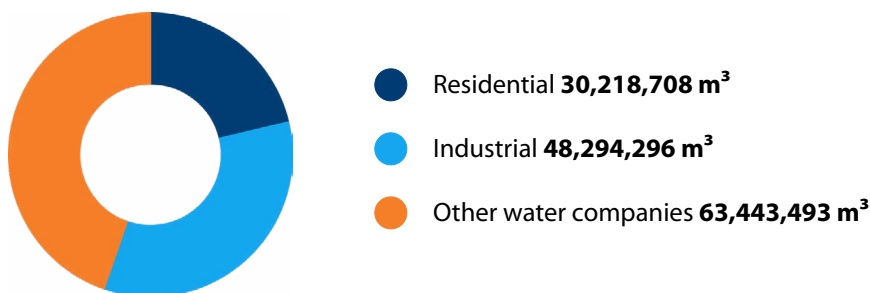
*We provide safe and healthy water for people and the environment*

### Residential deliveries in m<sup>3</sup>





## Domestic drinking water



## Drinking water quality



"Tap water remains the best choice, according to science."

### Following up quality complaints

Managing drinking water complaints is crucial in water distribution. An efficient process is essential, with clear communication and accurate recording. We therefore strive to handle quality complaints efficiently, to quickly restore confidence in our drinking water.

Any investigation and response should be thorough and quick; collecting information on site, performing water sample analysis and consulting the relevant documentation to identify the cause. This management strategy is essential to ensure the quality and reliability of the drinking water supply.

	2022	2023
Number of quality complaints	44	28
Number of substantiated complaints*	4	7
Complaint processing time in days	3	4

## PFAS in drinking water

Our drinking water is closely monitored and complies with strict regulations. The European Drinking Water Directive sets a standard value for the 20 most relevant individual PFAS (PFAS-20): the sum of these PFAS molecules must be less than 100 nanograms per litre. Furthermore, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) proposed a reference value of 4 ng/l for the sum of 4 PFAS molecules (EFSA-4): PFOS, PFOA, PFNA and PFHxS.

In 2023, **water-link's drinking water complied with the European Drinking Water Directive** (PFAS-20) as well as the quality requirements of the drinking water regulator regarding EFSA-4.

## Customer service

### From Digital To Better

In 2023, we were able to build further on the success of the digital water meter. Thus, we have had to make **fewer and fewer amicable settlements due to invisible leaks**.

Our proactive approach through leak detection allows us to **inform customers in good time**. If requests still come in, they are more often permitted because they meet the legal requirements.

In addition, we have focused on **contract-less installations**. Through the digital meter, we can see which meters are consuming water without a known subscriber. We then identified these subscribers through a collaboration between the Products and Services Department and Customer Contact Centre (CCC). This allowed us to reduce this figure significantly in 2023.

Creation year	2021	2022	2023
Total number of requests	372	236	173
Number of requests approved	158	116	110

## Customer satisfaction

Despite the use of the Customer Contact Centre (KCC) in 2023, the turnaround time for complaints was longer; this delay, however, was eliminated by year-end. This caused our **customer satisfaction to reduce to 70%**. We expect to improve here as we focus further **on training and coaching our employees**.

We closely monitor and analyse written customer queries, which means we can also make more targeted adjustments and take action. In 2022, we were already doing this for verbal queries, which means our level of **accessibility is now constantly over 80%**.

My water-link, the personal online dashboard for customers, is an important element in this and provides a first-line digital counter that helps with reports of leaks, for example, and offers insights into meter readings and billing.

70%

customer satisfaction

80%

constant availability

## Complaint follow-up report

**Year on year, we see that the number of complaints is decreasing.** This is also due to the digital meter, which gives us the information we can use to help customers in a more targeted way. This also enables us to avoid surprises on the customer side.

The digital meter enables us to detect a backflow of water on our grid. We examine whether that backflow could pose a threat to water quality. If necessary, we will send an inspector to the address concerned. They will make an analysis and give the customer binding advice on how to improve the situation. In some cases, we have to resort to a temporary shutdown to prevent serious contamination of our grid. Result: fewer quality complaints.

Complaints	2021	2022	2023
Inadmissible	5	4	10
Unfounded	213	82	74
Grounded	486	147	100



## Distribution and delivery

### Investing in the pipeline network

Water-link invests in its pipeline network in a structured manner, both in extensions for new customer needs, new housing projects or requests from the business world, and in renovation works for the existing pipeline network.

**The renewal works are driven by an asset-focused approach based on a methodology that combines age, material and incident history into a risk score;** this score is an industry-standard methodology (SNAX) that aims to maintain the appropriate level of investment.

Thus, water-link aims to guarantee security of supply, sustain the high quality of the water supplied and minimise leakage losses.

The last two points are often expressed as the volume of Non-Revenue Water (NRW), i.e. the volume of water produced without revenue. The NRW is also incorporated into the International Leakage Index (ILI), which is monitored within water-link as a KPI.

In these works, water-link always pursues the 'less-disruption' principle for citizens; thus, more than 90% of renewal works are carried out in collaboration with other utility companies.

In addition, when major infrastructure works take place, such as sewerage works or the Oosterweel works, water-link is obliged to relocate its pipes. This also leads to large investments of several million euros.

**In total, water-link laid 59.74 kilometres of new distribution pipelines (diameter 100-300 mm) and 1.69 kilometres of new supply pipelines (diameter +400 mm) in 2023.**



## Wastewater: renew, maintain and repair sewers

*Contributing to the purification of water*

The sewerage rate in water-link's catchment area is very high; in the city of Antwerp, it is about 99.7%. We maintain quality infrastructure to ensure appropriate and safe water drainage. This is how we guarantee a future-oriented water management system.

**Water-link continued to invest in the renewal, expansion and renovation of sewerage infrastructure in 2023.**

In this context, climate change is a major challenge for the coming years. Cities like Antwerp are vulnerable to torrential rain; heavy run-off flows and paving lead to the current sewers having to cope with a great deal of water. This can lead to flooding. **That is why, in recent years, we have been focussing**

**intensively on the design and construction of robust and climate-resistant drainage systems, such as underground water buffering in city of Antwerp.**



**"Just because you can see asphalt or concrete pavement in the street doesn't mean we don't allow underground water to infiltrate."**

**Lieven Lauwerys, Account Manager**

Many new projects were also launched, both in a study phase and under implementation. This means another busy period in the coming years in terms of tendering, construction and project delivery.

This will be noticeable in the streetscape through temporary diversions, heavy site traffic, excavation cranes and trucks used for soil transport. In these cases too, we are making efforts to reduce disruption. More on that in our sustainability report.

## Antwerp water plans

**Keeping the city of Antwerp climate-proof** means smart management of dry and wet periods. This is and will remain the framework for our plans and works through 2023.

Our infrastructure works separate wastewater from rainwater, drain rainwater to prevent nuisance, allow it to infiltrate as much as possible, and then buffer it underground to provide water to the above-ground greenery that brightens and cools the streets.

There is no single plan: we are working with the city, AG Vespa, Aquafin, Woonhaven and other partners on the plans. A stormwater plan covers the type of drainage that is most appropriate for each area and, because the situation in each neighbourhood is different, each one has a neighbourhood plan.

Dealing with water in an urban environment is a tough balancing act. It involves weather statistics, budgets, urban development, groundwater levels, neighbourhoods, geography, drought, technology, data, coordination and so on.

## Infrastructure & maintenance

The entire operating area managed by water-link is 2,352 km of which 1,469 km is in the city of Antwerp, with its 9 districts. By 2023, we will have constructed a total of 43 km of new sewers.

**38**

**million euros  
invested in replacement and  
expansion**

**412**

**sewer connections  
installed**

**130**

**km of sewers cleared**

## The Antwerp city loop

Infrastructure works on the Antwerp City Loop started at the end of May 2023. The City Loop is a stretch of almost 2 kilometres in the historic centre. In this major renovation work, on behalf of the city of Antwerp, the sewerage, drinking water pipes, paving and tram infrastructure will be completely renovated in collaboration with Aquafin and De Lijn.

Water-link is renewing the entire main sewer system and house connections. Where there is sufficient space, a **separate sewerage system** will be constructed. Porous concrete pipes allow **rainwater infiltration**. We will also provide **new connections for waste and rainwater** for discharge during larger rainfalls on the masonry 'ruien', the old city canals. The total investment is around €20 million, of which water-link will bear €7.5 million for sewerage works. The works should be completed by 2025.

## Commissioning of Royerssluis

Since September 2023 **the Vijzel pumping station Royerssluis and the Mexicostraat pumping station have been protecting Antwerp city centre and some neighbouring districts from flooding**. The new plant, which we realised in collaboration with Aquafin, can handle 8,000 litres of rainwater and 500 litres of wastewater per second.

Using four gigantic (Archimedes) screws, the pumping station regulates the transport of rainwater, which is brought in from the inner city and some peripheral areas via the canals and has to go to the Scheldt. A bypass has also been provided that uses gravity to send rainwater into the Scheldt when water levels are low. We save energy as the water does not have to be pumped up. The bypass is a large concrete tube of about 450 metres, which is fully accessible thanks to its generous dimensions of 4 by 2.5 m (W x H).

The new wastewater pumping station on Mexicostraat will pump wastewater from the city centre towards the water treatment plant in Antwerp South.

## Lillo master plan: separate sewer system

Together with the city of Antwerp, water-link and Aquafin have equipped all streets in Fort Lillo with a separate sewerage system. This, in turn, connects to a new small-scale water treatment plant (KWZI). Works to restore the Scheldt village to its historic form were completed by the end of 2023.

In addition to the **separate sewerage system, water-link has also ensured that rainwater can filter through** via wadis and porous joints between the cobblestone pavement.

Given the historical nature of Lillo, the drainage works were combined with archaeological research. This allowed the archaeological finds made during our intervention to be mapped. The history and evolution of Fort Lillo can thus be further traced. The total investment cost is about €1.9 million of which water-link will bear about €1.2 million for the sewerage works.

## Green and blue in Berchem

In September 2023, Berchem district and water-link, along with Aquafin, started work on the reconstruction of Kanunnik Peetersstraat, Wapenhaghestraat and part of Florent Bauduinstraat.

Above-ground, we are committed to creating a **greener and more traffic-safe living environment**, and to **consciously 'softening' the street**.

We collect rainwater from the remaining new street paving in central wadis where it can **filter effectively** into the subsoil. Only during very heavy rainfall do we drain rainwater and a connection to the Brilschansvijver is planned for this purpose. In addition, we are replacing the old, mixed sewer with **separated sewers** and renewing the drinking water supply pipe.

The total length of the sewers we are renewing is 1 km and water-link is contributing around €2.8 million of the total investment of €4 million for this work.

## In peripheral municipalities

In Mortsels, Edegem, Hemiksem, Kapellen, Ranst, Schoten, Kalmthout and Hove, we are responsible for the management and maintenance of sewers in close cooperation with the municipalities. We invest the sanitation grant in building and renewing sewers and spent €11 million on this in 2023.

We also developed rainwater and drought plans with the municipalities. These were ready by the end of 2023. From the strategic asset management plan, we have also located top-critical sewers, which we will check with camera inspection by 2024 at the latest.

## **Investments**

### **Pipework inspection**

All in all, 2023 was a very busy year for sewerage operations. Many new infrastructure and sewerage projects were initiated and realised by water-link itself or in cooperation with partners such as the city of Antwerp, AG Vespa, the Agency for Roads and Traffic, and De Lijn. The total amount tendered at the expense of water-link was around €70 million.

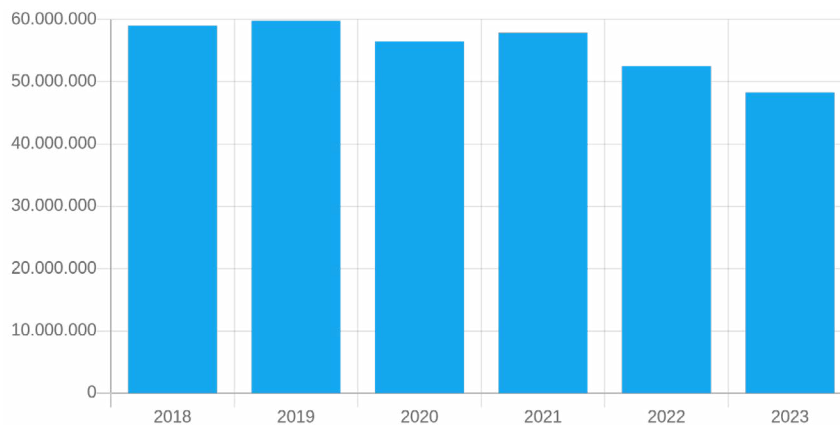




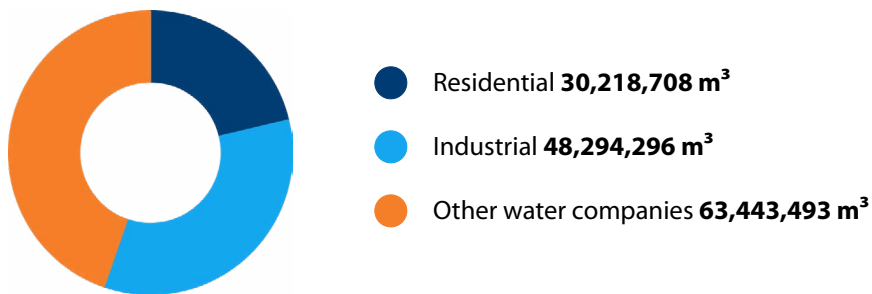
## Industrial water production, transport and delivery

*We guarantee security of supply, today and tomorrow*

### Industrial deliveries in m<sup>3</sup>



## Domestic drinking water



## Industrial vision plan

The water landscape within the industrial context is systematically changing. The industry wishes to reduce its process water requirements. The shift towards circular solutions has begun and is likely to continue. Security of supply and competitiveness remain crucial concerns.

**The importance of water will increase in the future and help determine whether large industry remains viable in Flanders.** The changing landscape creates new opportunities, both in terms of cooperation between companies and within the development of new services. In contrast, commercial models based purely on volume sales come under pressure when companies start systematically reducing their water demand.

Water-link itself is also in the midst of change. For industrial customers, treated water is a crucial resource in production processes, such as cooling or steam applications.



Vlaamse  
overheid



Gefinancierd door  
de Europese Unie  
NextGenerationEU



## **Circular cooling water project Antwerp**

With the cooling water project in Antwerp, water-link is introducing a new, circular product, which strengthens water-link's position and offers a sustainable alternative for the industry. With the cooling water project, water-link will recycle wastewater and upgrade it into cooling water for companies in the port of Antwerp. It is a circular story where the pre-treated wastewater of 600,000 Antwerp residents from Aquafin treatment plants is used as a new raw water source for industrial water. By doing this, we are safeguarding the Albert Canal, our freshwater source for drinking water, and taking an initial, important step towards circular water for industry.

This cooperation project is part of the Blue Deal, the action plan through which the Flemish government is combating drought and water scarcity. It encompasses over 70 actions and 400 projects. With the Blue Deal, Flanders is moving towards less paving, more humidification (raising groundwater levels) and maximum circular water use.

## **Wastewater reuse in Ghent**

Also in the port of Ghent, water-link is developing circular solutions around the Rodenhuedok in cooperation with existing industrial customers.

The treated commercial wastewater will be further treated and reused in production processes. This reduces the pressure on surface water in the Ghent-Terneuzen Canal.

## **Expanding industrial customer base**

Within the changing industrial context, water-link's ambition is to maintain and strengthen its leadership position. A clear strategy, coupled with a defined action plan, should clarify the direction and priorities for the industrial segment. Security of supply for industry through treated water plants is crucial.

This movement also ensures additional customers decide to get involved. For example, the Indus I water treatment plant supplies a number of (petro)chemical companies in the port of Antwerp with demineralised water with complete outsourcing. From source to delivery, with backup, monitoring and administration included.

Bayer Agriculture decided to connect into this in 2022. It will thus be connected, as a new customer, to the demineralised water supply network along Scheldelaan to take high quality water from Induss I.

Industrial water supply	
million m <sup>3</sup> supply of treated water to industry	11.1
Plant availability	
Induss I	100%
Induss II	99.91%
Induss III	99.90%
Induss V	100%
Induss VI	100%
Induss VII	99.90%
m <sup>3</sup> volume of bulk water	14,047

## Supply agreements

### Covestro - Envalior

We will supply demineralised water and process water to chemical company Covestro from 01/01/2025. Initially, we are doing this in cooperation with neighbouring company Envalior. In a second phase, we will build a new demineralised water plant on this site, based on increased demineralised water intakes along Scheldelaan. With these new cooperation agreements, we will further expand and strengthen water-link's demineralised water cluster in the port of Antwerp.

From mid-2026, we will also have the capability to supply circular cooling water to Covestro.

### Frans Tijsman Tunnel

Under the Frans Tijsman Tunnel, there is a DN900 pipeline, a strategically important water-link supply line. Through this pipeline, we supply our customers on the Scheldelaan and on the Left Bank with drinking water.

Due to years of infiltration by water and road salt, the supply line has become badly damaged. **Just under the road surface of the Tijsmanstunnel, the difficult access and numerous cables and pipes in the shaft of these works make it an 'out of category' project.**

To ensure the safety and security of supply at all times, all of the departments involved, i.e. Operations, assisted by Legal, Procurement and Prevention, prepared the works to perfection. To do so, they worked closely with partners such as the Agency for Roads and Traffic, among others.

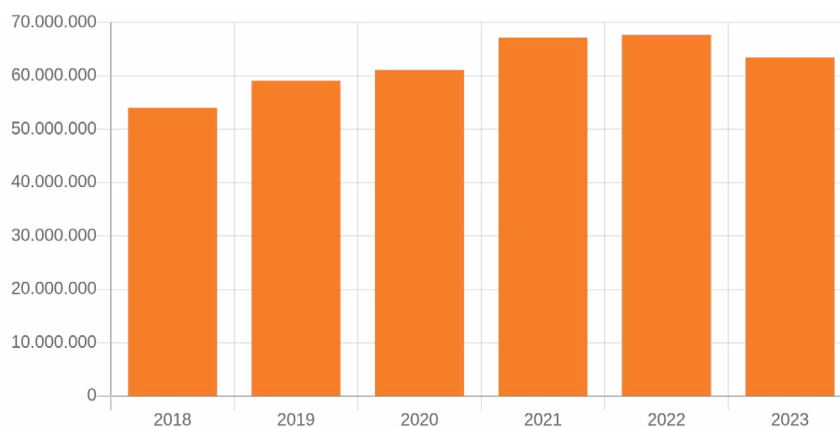
Based on the data and insights we gathered in 2022, we were able to construct a bypass pipeline and decommission the current DN900 in spring 2023. In 2024, the supply pipeline team will continue working with the procurement department to start the final repairs later in the year.



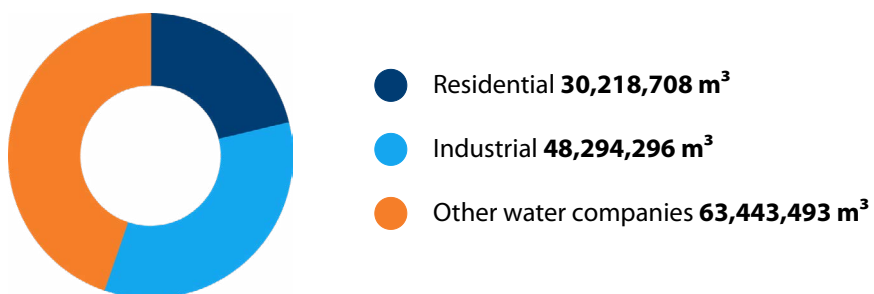
## Drinking water for water companies producing and transporting

*We guarantee security of supply, today and tomorrow*

### Deliveries to other water companies in m<sup>3</sup>



### Domestic drinking water





## Partnerships & collaborations

### Viersel-Walem supply pipeline in collaboration with Pidpa

Water-link, together with Pidpa, is looking at investing in a new connecting pipeline (DN900) between clean water cell 2 of the south production in Duffel-Walem and the collector next to the Albert Canal in Viersel. **In this way, we are strengthening the drinking water network.**

The new pipe will be connected to an existing Pidpa water supply pipe (DN650) at five locations. Moreover, it will be able to transport 90,000 m<sup>3</sup> of drinking water daily from our production site in Oelegem to the one in Walem.

**Both Pidpa and water-link will be able to supply the pipeline, allowing us to better support each other in the future.**

The public review of the regional spatial implementation plan (GRUP) took place in 2022. In 2023, the GRUP was approved.

### Balancing model and working group impact study

In 2023, the water companies worked together on an **update of the Strategic Plan for Water Supply in Flanders**. With the clear impact of climate change, the way forward involves good cooperation and smart investment in climate-robust solutions. Water-link is responsible for 40% of drinking water production in Flanders: our role in this is considerable.

Together with the other water companies, we identified **"no regret" investments** while also not losing sight of the broad impact of these projects.

For the latter, we developed a **first version of the Impactwijzer**, which evaluates the broad impact of our investments in 6 domains:

- cost
- climate
- nature
- source protection and diversification
- security of supply
- other water users

The impact indicator allows us, as water companies, to ensure that we realise projects that not only advance the drinking water sector, but also contribute to a **strong, global water system for Flanders**.

In 2024, a **panel of experts** reviewed the drinking water companies' project portfolio. As an industry, we welcome substantive discussion and additional insights. Only in this way can we together shape a resilient water landscape in Flanders.

## Supply agreements

### Additional deliveries to De Watergroep in Zemst

From 2024, water-link will supply De Watergroep with 4 million m<sup>3</sup> - or an average of 11,000 m<sup>3</sup> per day - of drinking water on an annual basis to the delivery point In Zemst. This comes from the Walem water production centre north of Mechelen, with water-link committing to install an additional pipeline and pumping station capable of delivering up to 20,000 m<sup>3</sup> per day. This way, The Water Group can be sure of water even in dry summers.

### Building expertise to deal with drought

The summer of 2022 brought many dry months. Despite pressure on the Albert Canal and the Meuse, there were never any issues with the supply of drinking water. Furthermore, based on our practical experience that year, we could **take steps in 2023 to make us even more resilient**.

Specifically, we implemented three actions:

1. **We refined sensor data from the Aquaspice project** in collaboration with VITO to refine our model of the Albert Canal. This will allow us to monitor the condition of the canal both qualitatively and quantitatively, more accurately in the future. As a result, together with The Flemish Waterway, we will be able to make better operational decisions in times of drought.
2. **We implemented a drought dashboard with live data** concerning the status of our freshwater source, production and delivery. This dashboard gathers all the necessary information to quickly and clearly assess the impact of the drought on our operation. It allows our operational teams to move quickly, and us to make data-driven decisions.
3. **KUL updated the study of the long-term impact** of climate change on the Meuse and Albert Canal based on insights and sensor data from summer 2022. The study confirms that the impact on the canal will be significant, but also confirms that, according to current climatic insights, with the realisation of the cooling water project and the new reservoir, we will be sufficiently resilient to cope with the impact.

Step by step, we are getting closer to a climate-robust drinking water supply.

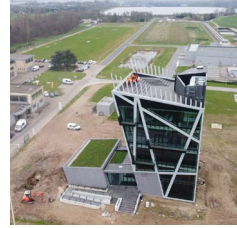


**"The fact is that we manage our water system together with all stakeholders: the Flemish Waterway, Port of Antwerp-Bruges and water-link. Data underpins our consultations, policies and decision-making, and aligns our needs."**

**Sven Kempeneers, Process Technologist Operations**

# Our strategy in practice

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## Our strategy in practice

Innovate, become more sustainable, use data more effectively, invest in smart partnerships

*Building the team of the future. Find out how our strategy works every day*

## Continuous improvement

In addition to our projects, we are also gradually improving **our internal processes**. We do so in a risk and process-driven way.

## Robotic Process Automation (RPA)

With Robotic Process Automation (RPA), we let a digital robot perform repetitive tasks. This virtual assistant **takes on clear, simple and repetitive processes, giving our teams more time for core tasks. Thus, it also contributes to employee satisfaction.**



## "A robot that takes over repetitive tasks: it is one of the many faces of digitalisation at water-link."

**Kathleen Van Houtte, Manager back office**

In the first phase, we used it for Invoicing & Collection, where duties included sorting cases and handling the instalment plans we create and implement.

Since the second phase, from March 2023, it has also taken on tasks at our customer centre, such as processing population register data that could not be assigned after the annual upload. The robot also sorts incoming customer emails and checks emails that do not arrive.

## Standpipes for safe temporary water

With the "Safe Temporary Water" project, in-house employees are responsible for installing standpipes. Thanks to the integration with the SAP system, we have not only **realised cost savings but also made the process more efficient.**

We can now closely monitor each stage of the process. This is a good basis for further optimising our processes in the future.

## Better with data

For several years, our data strategy has been built on two pillars:

- **Improving our data management**  
Working with more and more qualitative data
- **Optimising our use of that data**  
Further refining our reporting.

Within data management, we strive to improve data quality in our systems. That's why we started an interdepartmental collaboration, which we call data domain collaboration. In these data domains, we identify issues and look at how to solve, and more importantly, prevent them. This leads to **improved processes, better work instructions** and often results in adjustments to our systems.

In 2022, we started with the data domains 'assets', 'connections' and 'customer'. In 2024, we will look at setting up a similar interdepartmental collaboration around materials.



**"We have set up our platform to be 'open' so we can gather new data such as location and land data and link it to our water meter data. That expands our insights and allows us to take further steps forward."**

**Hans Smeuninx, Asset manager**

Within data usage, we aim to improve reporting and data availability. We want to become a Self-service Business Intelligence (BI) organisation, in which report builders from the business can create their own reports.

In 2023, the Historical Process Data project was realised. This involved feeding all data from our process control systems (SCADA) into our Data Integration Platform (DIP). **The DIP makes data editing much easier and we can quickly provide reports in Power BI.** In the future, we want to expand our DIP so that data from different systems can be easily combined in reports. Moreover, our platform enables a smoother data exchange between systems.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is making great strides at a rapid pace, and water-link should not miss this express train. We look at which cases could be interesting and how we can acquire relevant knowledge around them. Our dynamic data platform should allow AI models to be supplied with data efficiently and appropriately.

## **Intelligent Control Centre construction nearing completion**

We are currently building a state-of-the-art control centre in Walem. This is ultra-modern and fully in line with our sustainable principles.



**The Intelligent Control Centre (ICC) will not only be energy-neutral, but also completely fossil-free. By centralising control of our production and distribution at this location, water-link's operations will be more efficient and greener.**

Construction work started in February 2022. Our IT teams make every effort to deliver the necessary equipment in time to further equip the ICC with the latest technologies. At the end of 2023, we completed the construction works and it is now time to set everything up. We are planning the relocation for mid-2024. The grand opening of the ICC, which will accommodate 65 staff, is scheduled for 2 October 2024.

## Investing in smart partnerships

### Labo and Blue Stream projects

In June 2020, the boards of directors of Pidpa and water-link decided to join forces in a joint lab. Work on the realisation of this joint lab continued in 2023. The staff exchange, which began in 2022, also continued. **As a result, we are already creating a win-win situation in terms of knowledge sharing and cooperation.**

Preparations were also made for the establishment of a unified quality management system, a crucial component for the operation of an accredited and recognised drinking water laboratory. As part of the future accreditation of the joint lab, discussions with BELAC, the Belgian Accreditation Body, also started in autumn 2023.

Further work also focussed on comparing and aligning operational functioning, from document management to analysis processes. **To facilitate the integration of the two labs, a new lab manager was recruited in September 2023.**

In 2023, on top of the operational integration, a great deal of hard work was done on the requirements of a single lab building.

The various options were further identified.

In 2023, intensive work continued on the merger with Pidpa. We worked hard on being ready to function as one company by the end of 2023. Until, not too far out from the 1 January 2024 deadline, we learned that Pidpa were pushing the pause button.

## Blue app

Collaboration with the University of Antwerp continued in 2023. Two lab staff from UAntwerp were supervised and trained by our colleagues. In parallel, we continued to work on developing the business plan for Blue App lab at University of Antwerp.

However, the business plan concluded that the project was not financially viable in either the short or long term. In early 2024, therefore, a decision was made not to pursue this cooperation further.

However, Water-link and the University of Antwerp both strongly believe in the power of mutual cooperation and a small research project around PFAS was launched in 2023. In 2024, we will both explore how we can cooperate more strongly in the future in various areas, including sustainability, digitalisation and water quality.

## Cooperation agreement Flemish Waterway

Vlaamse Waterweg (DVW), operator of our source the Albert Canal, is an important partner for water-link. During periods of drought, we work closely together on operations and our teams coordinate frequently.

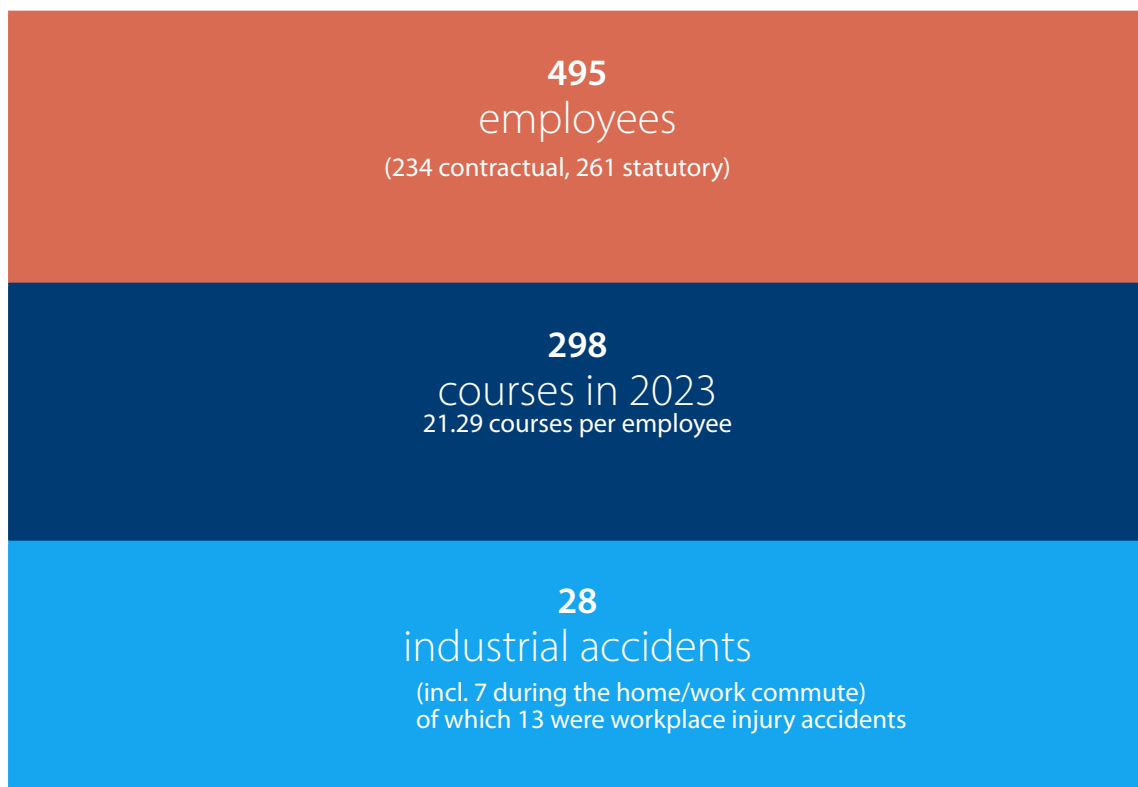
To reaffirm the importance of our momentum and structure it more broadly, **we developed a co-operation agreement in 2023**. Formally signed in February 2024, it contains concrete operational arrangements for periods of drought while also summarising our intention to work together on **overall security of supply and climate adaptations to the Albert Canal**, the most important source of freshwater in Flanders.

## Building the team of the future

Water-link is constantly evolving. To ensure the organisation is ready for the future, we must move with the times. **As an organisation with engineering at its heart, we are increasingly data-driven.** This requires not only new systems, but also adapted skills. We continuously guide our people in this transition to ensure they can continue to have an impact today and tomorrow.

As the organisation changes, so does the leadership. Line managers, particularly in an organisation going through constant changes, serve as role models. It is up to them to get the best out of their teams, surround themselves with different competencies and be constantly challenged by new insights. This can only happen within a context of trust. **People-oriented leadership with room for transparency and inspiring clarity is what we aim for, without losing sight of technical competencies.**

**We also cherish our experts.** They are the people who apply their problem-solving skills to the challenges in our path. For them, we outline separate pathways, with a strong focus on continuous learning and working in mixed teams where multiple disciplines are combined.



## Talent development and training

At water-link, we invest in the sustainable employability of our employees. Talent development and training are therefore among the focal points of our HR policy. In 2023, we again offered our employees a diverse training package, which included on-the-job training, external courses and online training through our own platforms.

### Socrates leadership path

Leadership is about being power-oriented and showing your employees that they can do more than they think. **To support the managers within water-link in their personal growth and that of their team, the 'Socrates' programme was launched three years ago.**

Developing leadership is a long-term issue. The Socrates programme started in 2021. Leadership was developed via six modules and follow-up sessions and peer-discussion groups were organised in 2022. In 2023, water-link continued this with three leadership pit-stops, each of which has three parts: a peer discussion group, lunch & learn and an individual mentoring.

### Cybersecurity awareness

Cyber attacks are a real risk for businesses worldwide. As an organisation, we strive to protect against this with security measures and by continuously raising awareness via training. Since water-link can also be the target of cybercrime, we make every effort to protect our organisation against it.

To protect water-link from cyber attacks, we have invested heavily in the security of our IT systems in recent years. **These efforts have been rewarded: according to a independent evaluation, water-link is among the leaders in IT security within both public and commercial utilities.** This is an achievement that we are particularly proud of.

### Safety culture

In 2023, we continued to work on our safety culture with different teams. Safety is now a fixed agenda item for all teams. In 2023, standard safety training courses were carefully reviewed. There was also a focus on the safety aspects of working at height, including the use of ladders, scaffolding, fall protection, scissor lifts and aerial work platforms, and first aid training. This ensures that we always meet the required safety standards.

## **Starting Welfare Month 2023: Think safe, work safe**

**In October 2023, water-link launched another safety month with a focus on healthy and safe working.** The month encompassed workshops and training such as checking physical health, first aid and resuscitation techniques.

Topics ranged from defensive driving to ergonomics in the laboratory. Participants could sign up for various workshops and training sessions suited to their jobs.

**During the welfare days, more than 300 of our employees also attended safety training tailored to their function and department.** These replaced the traditional, more general safety days. Management was always present to stress the importance of working safely. Customised training was scheduled in consultation with the manager.

Topics covered:

- signage on public roads
- flange mounting
- safe forklift operation
- defensive driving
- ergonomics
- Using an AED device

There was also a focus on the **general physical health of our employees.** In a session with a health coach, colleagues gained insights into their physical fitness. A personalised report then linked results to tailored health advice.

## **Reception days and water class days**

The #waterclass2023 was born in 2023, with no fewer than 94 employees. Welcome moments are important for an organisation. As a new employee, this gives you a unique look behind the scenes and allows you to get to know your colleagues better.

The day started with a breakfast with management, followed by site visits, tours, a safety session, and a walk. **This gives new recruits the best possible start in the network organisation we are becoming.**

## MT on Tour

In a corporate culture where connection is key, communication is crucial. This year, the management team at water-link also took the time to interact with employees, with: MT on Tour.

**These meetings reflected on the organisation's achievements and looked ahead to the future,** with topics such as our response to the drought problem, our safety culture, competition at the port of Antwerp and cooperation with Pidpa.

## Butterfly

At water-link, every employee's voice is crucial as they are the core of our organisation. The Butterfly method allows us to gain valuable insights into what resonates with our employees.

Behind the scenes, much work has focussed on developing Butterfly, an online survey tool. With the right kind of questions, we can quickly gather relevant information while ensuring that all data remains anonymous.

**The HR team and managers receive a summary of the results on a regular basis, allowing them to take targeted action and address specific needs or discuss particular issues within their teams.**

In 2023, we committed to encouraging all managers and employees to actively use this tool.

## Partnership with Enactus, Digital Youth and Youthstart

**We are happy to commit to lowering barriers to entrepreneurship and digital skills for young people.** In 2023, we will continue our actions with Enactus and Digital Youth.

In February '23, water-link organised an inspiring workshop with Enactus students, focusing on social entrepreneurship. This initiative was launched because water-link wants to work on today's societal challenges.

Students from the 3rd year Applied Computer Science of the Karel De Grote Hogeschool participated in several Enactus workshops on social entrepreneurship, with water-link staff leading the session. The students received coaching and practical testimonials, which provided plenty of inspiration.



During the workshop, students were challenged to tackle four related water problems. One group chose to "encourage drinking tap water".

The developed concept was presented, followed by feedback from a panel of experienced social entrepreneurs and experts. This feedback helped them further develop their ideas.

Digital for Youth invites organisations to contribute to a sustainable future by donating old IT hardware. Water-link has been part of this project for a few years and, in October 2023, we had old servers collected for reuse. **We extend the life of electronics, reduce waste, save costs and help close the digital divide for children and young people in our country between the ages of 6 and 25.**

No certification ceremony took place in 2023, but our cooperation with Youthstart continued.

### **Family Day**

Water-link organised a family day on Sunday 26 March during the 3rd edition of the Flemish Water Days. **During the day, water-link opened its doors to the general public, as well as our own employees and their families.**

Visitors were able to walk along the Eekhoven reservoir and could take a look at a purification unit where 150,000 cubic metres of sustainable drinking water were produced daily. We gave our colleagues more insights into the purification process while the children enjoyed interesting activities. It was a fun day for the whole family.

### **Review of the inspiring 'Platformisation' session**

Water-link, together with KPMG and Vlerick Business School, organised an inspiring session on 'platformisation'. This session focused on setting up water-link's Digital Information Platform (DIP) as a service platform. **Participants, including managers and experts, discussed concrete examples and brainstormed about setting up the platform.**

The programme included discussions on digital platforms, practical collaboration and the presentation of new concepts. **The concept of 'platformisation' encourages innovation and entrepreneurship**, and water-link aims to be at the forefront of this development within the water sector. The session was the first step in exploring the potential of the DIP and will be followed up.

## Electrification of vehicles

From 2023, the tax deductibility of fossil fuels will decrease year by year, while from 2026 a tax-friendly regime will only apply to zero-emission commercial vehicles (EVs).

Water-link's current approach to operational leasing is reaching its limits, resulting in challenges for employees and employers due to the (taxable) Benefit in Kind (Voordeel van Alle Aard or VAA), among others, and declining tax deductibility.

Water-link aims to be a leader in sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). **The aim is to prepare water-link for the full electrification of company cars, so we have started rolling out an all-electric (company) fleet.**

This involves transparent communication and a clear policy to inform employees about possibilities and limitations.

## Flexplan

Over the past year, we have noticed a remarkable trend among our employees: a growing interest in purchasing bicycles. **Not only have more people chosen to purchase bikes as part of our Flexplan, but many have also decided to keep their bikes after the end of their lease period and even purchase a second one.**

Some of our staff shared their experience with us: "Thanks to water-link's Flexplan, I was able to buy my new bike. I enjoy cycling immensely, and safety is always my first priority."

**This trend not only shows that our employees value a healthy lifestyle and environmentally friendly transport, but also that our Flexplan allows them to make choices that suit their life-style.**

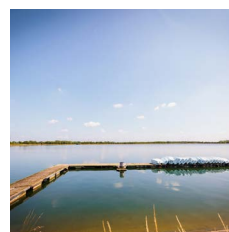
We are delighted to contribute to the well-being of our employees and support them in making decisions that make sense both personally and professionally.

## Recruitment of maintenance staff

Water-Link is looking for motivated maintenance workers for various production sites and works on the pipeline network. Given the challenges in today's job market, where finding technicians is a major challenge, we realise that not all of these people are active on the same social media platforms. Therefore, we tailor our recruitment campaign accordingly by creating a dynamic employer branding video.

In this video, we aim to highlight colleagues through testimonials and make the job of maintenance workers attractive. The aim was to create a short, engaging video that exudes a positive atmosphere and encourages viewers to apply.

The recruitment campaign has spread across various channels such as VDAB, Indeed, etc... and is starting to develop its own momentum. **There has been an increase in the number of candidates for these positions.**



## Sustainable business

Working sustainably means being able to offer security of supply and vice versa

In our Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Report we clarify our ambitions, strategy and actions in the field of sustainability.

We report according to international standards and share concrete data and results, from emissions and human resources to financing, with full transparency. Our CSR strategy is clearly built on five pillars that run throughout our operations:

1. **Secure water supply**  
providing security of supply today and tomorrow
2. **Safe and healthy for people and the environment**  
Delivering safe water in balance with people and the environment
3. **More sustainable internally**  
systematically making our own operations more sustainable
4. **Engaged and resilient**  
powerful employees, strong water-link
5. **Close partner**  
for all parties we work with and for

CSR is not the responsibility of one person or department. Numerous experts throughout our organisation contribute to the realisation of our sustainable ambitions every day. Special teams have been set up for this purpose with the ambition-owners.

Each ambition has one ambition owner, who is responsible for the outcome. He or she has a coordinating role within the team of action owners. Action owners are experts, as well as anyone who can help develop and achieve the ambition. This is how we ensure that people and their knowledge match each of the ambitions.

Add link to Sustainability Report

Our sustainability strategy in practice:  
from Less Disruption and Cyber Safety to reducing our carbon footprint:

# Key figures

Staff	2021	2022	2023
Number of employees	518	511	495
Number of recruits	35	36	29

Rates	2021	2022	2023
HH base rate (per m <sup>3</sup> )	1.4212	1.4616	1.6289
HH comfort rate (per m <sup>3</sup> )	2.8424	2.9232	3.2578
NHH flat rate (per m <sup>3</sup> )	1.5802	1.5936	1.7486

*HH is domestic, NHH is not domestic.*

*The basic rate applies to basic consumption. That is 30 m<sup>2</sup> per residential unit and plus 30 m<sup>2</sup> per resident per year. Comfort rate applies to all water consumed in excess of basic consumption.*

Customers	2021	2022	2023
Residents served area	616,515	617,735	629,335
Drinking water customers	198,405	202,117	207,023
Water remediation customers	240,581	244,293	249,199
New sewer connections	227	301	412
Drinking water connections	430	485	487

Water supplies	2021	2022	2023
Total volume produced (in m <sup>3</sup> )	157,060,315	151,895,632	142,219,434
Average daily volume (in m <sup>3</sup> )	430,527	408,941	383,114
Highest daily volume (in m <sup>3</sup> )	501,803	500,262	494,673
Residential supplies (in m <sup>3</sup> )	30,667,101	31,278,566	30,218,708
Industrial supplies (in m <sup>3</sup> )	57,858,903	52,483,006	48,294,296
Deliveries to other water companies: Pidpa, De Watergroep, TMVW and Evides (in m <sup>3</sup> )	67,211,410	67,677,775	63,443,493
Total billed volume	155,737,414	151,439,347	141,956,497
Length of pipeline network in km	2,324	2,289	2,293
Length of sewerage network in km	2,280	2,309	2,352

# In the press and media

## Water-link participates in Flemish Water Days

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18 to 24 March

Water-link opened its doors for a look behind the scenes with guided tours of the Eekhoven reservoir and Walem treatment plant. Despite the bad weather at the end of March, it attracted many visitors: 120 visitors, 94 new colleagues and 40 entrepreneurs (VOKA) in total.

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## Opening party Jan Olieslagersstraat Deurne

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5 May

District Deurne opens the newly constructed garden street during a residents' party in collaboration with water-link and Aquafin.

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## Opening party phase 2 Gedempte Zuiderdokken

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23 June

In the presence of Antwerp Alderman for port, urban development, spatial planning and patrimony Annick De Ridder, the second phase of the Gedempte Zuiderdokken development was celebrated. Phase 2 is a milestone in this project, with a grand opening celebration to follow in 2024 when the park is completely finished.



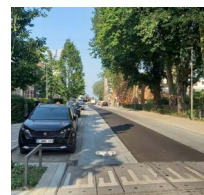
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## Opening party Louisalei Hoboken

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8 August

Opening neighbourhood party and residents to celebrate the complete makeover of the Louisalei in Hoboken, where both sewerage and road infrastructure were renewed.



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## Commissioning of Royerssluis screw pumping station and Mexicostraat pumping station

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8 September

The new screw pumping station and pumping station on Mexicostraat are important links in preventing flooding in the city of Antwerp. With a transport capacity of 8,000 litres, they ensure efficient discharge of rainwater and wastewater from the city centre to the Scheldt and the Antwerp South water treatment plant.



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## Announcing name and logo for merged company Pidpa and Water-link

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13 September



On 13 September, the name of the new planned merged company was unveiled. The presence of Zuhail Demir, Flemish minister of Justice, Enforcement, Environment, Energy and Tourism, stressed the importance of this development.

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## Asset Performance Awards

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**25 October**

Water-link was on stage at Bemas' Asset Performance Awards in Antwerp on 25 October. The award this year honoured projects that focus on digital transformation and improvement of asset maintenance and management. We made it onto the shortlist with the digital water meter and the 'From Digital to Better' project, but did not win gold.



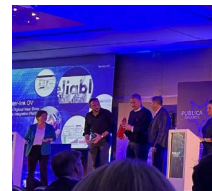
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## Publica Awards

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**23 November**

Water-link wins bronze in the Publica Awards with its digital water meter and 'From Digital to Better' project. With a nomination in the Technology category, this award recognises outstanding public projects and initiatives that set the standard for sustainability and social responsibility.





# The board

## Board of directors

André Gantman (chairman)

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Robert Voorhamme (vice-chairman)

---

Babette Dehaen

---

Hicham El Mzairh

---

Joost Goris

---

Patrick Paredaens

---

Gerda Lambrecht

---

Koen Laenens

---

Danielle Meirsman

---

Tjerk Sekeris

---

Lieve Voets

---

Monique Mahieu

---

Samuel Markowitz

---

Jan van der Vloet

---

Ann Van Damme

---

Sven Vlietinck

## **Management**

Koen De Schutter (ad interim from 26/10/2022)

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Ann Vylders

## **Revisor**

Grant Thornton Bedrijfsrevisoren, represented by Stefaan De Coninck.

# Downloads

## Annual accounts 2022

Annual accounts 2022

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Annual report BoD 2022

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Auditor's report

## Archive

Annual report

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2022  
Annual report 2021

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Annual report 2020

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Annual report 2019

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Annual report 2018

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Annual report 2017

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Annual report 2016

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Annual report 2015

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Annual report 2014

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Annual report 2013

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Annual report 2012

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Annual report 2011

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Annual report 2022

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Annual report 2021

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Annual report 2020

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Annual Report 2019

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Annual Report 2018

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Annual Report 2017

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Annual Report 2016

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Annual Report 2015

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Annual Report 2014

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Annual Report 2013

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Annual Report 2012

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Annual Report 2011

# Contact us

## General information

### Water-link

Company number: 0204.923.881

Legal form: commissioning association Laboratory: recognised and accredited according to EN 17025

### Headquarters

Mechelsesteenweg 66 2018 Antwerp

## For all your questions

[Go to our website](#)

Or call: 078 35 35 09

*(open continuously on weekdays from 8am to 4pm)*

## For urgent interventions

Call 03 244 05 44 *(permanently available)*