

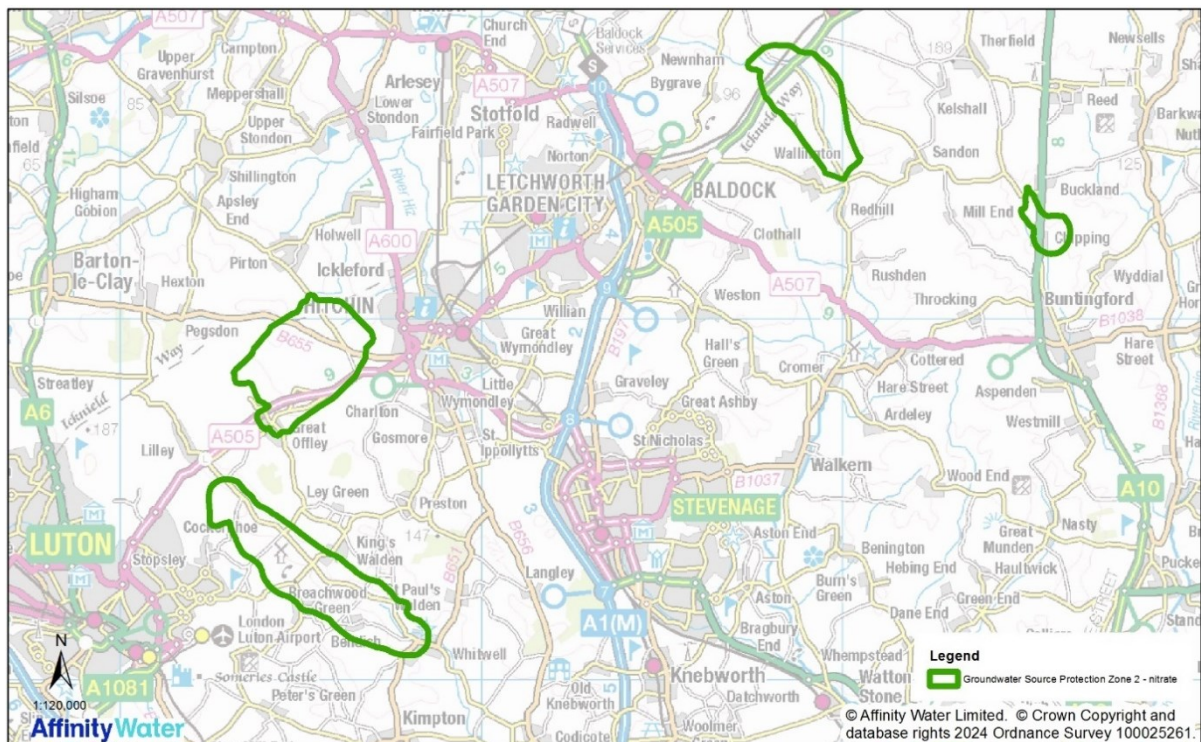


# The Functioning Soils Support Scheme 2025

**Affinity**Water



Affinity Water aspires to enhance soil health and create resilience catchments for farming, water supply and the environment. The main aim of this scheme is to reduce nitrate leaching to groundwater, improve water infiltration, protect chalk streams from runoff and improve biodiversity and crop productivity across north Hertfordshire.



**Figure 1: A map showing Affinity Water's scheme area based on the Groundwater Source Protection Zones 2 for our nitrate affected sources**

## What funding options are available through the Functioning Soils Support scheme in 2025?

Option No.	In-field Options	Details	Price/ha
1	Cover and companion crop seed support payment	<p>Farmers who missed out on the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) can apply for a funding contribution towards seed costs at a rate of <b>£45/ha for cover crops and companion crops in the ground over winter.</b></p> <p>The cover crop mix should be made up of a minimum of two <b>cover crop</b> species which provides cover up until at least the 15<sup>th</sup> January.</p> <p>The scheme is designed to be flexible with regards to <b>companion crop</b> species choice and we only require a minimum of one species. We would like to encourage companion cropping of winter oilseed rape with berseem clover and buckwheat to reduce herbicides losses.</p> <p>Examples of other companion crops of interest would be winter beans with oats and winter wheat with clover. Other combinations will also be considered.</p>	<b>£45/ha</b>
2	Soil Health Advice Visit	<p>We will fund a farm advice visit which covers any topics around soil health, including support with cover and companion cropping. We will require you to specify the topic of your advice visit on your application form.</p> <p>If this is accepted, we will fund the visit up to a maximum value of £500 per farm visit and one visit per season. An invoice and a summary of the learnings you will take forward following the visit is required in order to claim this funding.</p> <p>Any topics relating to soil health will be considered for funding e.g. finding the most effective cover crop mixes for your soil type, grazing cover crops, reducing inputs etc.</p>	<p><b>Up to £500 per farm visit</b></p> <p>(maximum of one visit per season)</p>
3	SFI Top up for SAM2 Cover Crop Mix	<p>The Sustainable Farming Incentive Actions for Soil SAM2 multi-species cover crops option currently pays £129/ha per year and this Affinity Water scheme option will provide a top up payment of £21/ha (making £150/ha in total). Mid-tier SW6 overwinter cover cropping can also be covered by this option.</p> <p>We require a diverse cover crop mix with a minimum of four species in the mix to qualify for this top up payment. This mix also needs to provide cover up until at least the 15<sup>th</sup> January.</p> <p>An example of an effective diverse cover crop mix to improve soil structure across a range of depths</p>	<b>£21/ha</b>

		<p>through the soil profile, might contain: oil radish, tillage radish, winter oats, rye and phacelia.</p> <p>A cereal-free cover crop mix could include buckwheat, crimson clover, linseed, oil radish, phacelia and vetch.</p>	
4	SFI Top up for IPM3 Companion Cropping	The Sustainable Farming Incentive Actions for Soil IPM3 companion cropping option pays £55/ha per year and this Affinity Water scheme option will provide a top up payment of £15/ha (making £70/ha in total) as an establishment support payment across high priority areas.	<b>£15/ha</b>
5	Farming Events for knowledge exchange	<p>We will reimburse you for tickets to the following farming shows which we are supporting in 2025 in order to help farmers build resilient businesses and explore potential funding opportunities for your farm. The shows we are supporting are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Groundswell (2 &amp; 3rd July 2025) Lannock Manor Farm, Weston, Hertfordshire</li> <li>• The Agroforestry show (10th &amp; 11th September 2025) Woodoaks Farm, Maple Cross, Hertfordshire</li> </ul>	<p><b>Full cost of the ticket</b> will be reimbursed (one ticket per farm business for each event maximum)</p>
6	Regenerative Farming Premium contracts support	We are interested to hear if you are growing any crops as part of a regenerative farming premium contract and the standards which you are growing to. Please state these in your application and if the standards are deemed to be of benefit to water and in a high-risk area for groundwater, we will be in contact to discuss this with you further about how we may be able to support.	
7	On-farm field trials projects	Funding is available for successful applicants to host an on-farm field trial in 2025/26. We are exploring the option of making a trials delivery payment this season, made payable to the host farm business. Any other associated costs will also be considered and can be stated in your application. A catchment advisor will be in touch to discuss your ideas and potential funding following your application submission.	

## Conditions and Advice for 2025/2026

### 1. Key information

#### 1.1 Payment and verification

Applications for this scheme can be made direct to Affinity Water via the online form or a hard copy of the application form can be requested.



After you submit your application, if you are applying for in-field options, we require a copy of any farm maps showing your cropping plans for next season with the fields (or blocks) which relate to your application. Please email these to [catchmentmanagement@affinitywater.co.uk](mailto:catchmentmanagement@affinitywater.co.uk)

For successful applications, payments will be made by Affinity Water before the **31<sup>st</sup> March 2026**. Full payment will be dependent upon the grower fulfilling all the conditions set out in this document and those in the contract which is issued following a successful application. If any conditions are not achieved due to factors outside the grower's control (such as adverse weather) then payment may still be made at the discretion of Affinity Water.

Affinity Water catchment advisers may contact the farmer or request verification photos of funded options around key dates (i.e. November/December to ensure that the cover crops have established).

## 1.2 Eligibility

All farmed fields within or close to the defined scheme area (map shown in Figure 1 on page 2 of this document) will be considered for funding. Acceptance of fields outside of these areas will be at the discretion of Affinity Water's catchment team.

The following **will not be funded** under this scheme in 2025/26:

- Cover and companion crops that **do not meet the conditions** set out in this document.
- Stubble turnips or other forage crops that have had a fertiliser application.
- Any crops which will be taken to harvest such as oilseed rape and barley do not count as a cover crops in this scheme.
- Any cover crops or other options that are currently, or due to be funded through the Landscape Enterprise Network for East of England scheme.
- We will not fund options 1 (seed support payment) if these fields are covered by the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI), Countryside Stewardship (CS) or Mid-Tier. Option 3 cover crop top up payment is available for cover crops in SFI SAM2, CS or Mid-tier (if four cover crop species plus are grown in the mixture).
- Option 4 is only available for companion cropped fields under the SFI companion crop option IPM3.
- We will not top up legume fallows, overwintering bird food or bumble bird mixes in SFI, CS or mid-tier.

## 1.3 How and when should I apply?

Eligible farmers will receive an e-mail introducing the scheme and applications can be placed via the online form between the **2<sup>nd</sup> June and 30<sup>th</sup> June 2025**. If you would like a phone call to discuss your options, please email the catchment team to request a call.

Please note, there is a £10,000 limit on the total funding which can be awarded to each farm business through the Functioning Soils Support scheme.

All applications received will be risk assessed and fields with measures situated closest to our groundwater sources will be prioritised, if the funding budget for 2025 is exceeded. Those options selected will be deemed as most beneficial for the

protection of groundwater. Therefore, you will be informed by the **14<sup>th</sup> July 2025** if your application has been successful and a contract will follow.

## 2. Cover Crops

### 2.1 When do cover crops need to be established by, and how?

Aim to establish the cover crop as soon as possible after harvest of the previous crop.

- Cover crops that follow **a combinable crop** should be established before **20<sup>th</sup> September**.
- If your cover crop establishment is delayed beyond the **20<sup>th</sup> September** due to weather conditions, please inform the Affinity Water catchment advisor.

**All funded cover crops should achieve a minimum of 80% groundcover by 1<sup>st</sup> December.**

Advice: Earlier maturing main crop varieties (e.g. the winter wheat or forage maize that the cover crop follows) will help to achieve timely cover crop establishment.

Advice: Discuss choice of drilling method with your agronomist / adviser. Less soil disturbance will result in less mineralisation of soil nitrogen which should reduce the risk of nitrate leaching, although a small amount of soil disturbance can aid cover crop establishment.

### 2.2 When can the cover crops be destroyed?

Do not destroy the cover crops funded by this scheme before **15<sup>th</sup> January**. Please speak to an Affinity Water catchment adviser for further information.

Advice: Reduced cultivations for the following crop should result in reduced nitrate leaching. If the field is to be ploughed or cultivated then it is recommended that this should not be before late February / early March, after which time the highest nitrate leaching risk period should have passed.

### 2.3 Is cutting and/or grazing of cover crops permitted?

Light grazing of cover crops is permitted under this scheme. We request that you let the Catchment Team know when this is likely to occur, and grazing should not result in significant areas of bare soil or poaching.

Please note, this option cannot be used within a Source Protection Zone 1 of any public water abstraction. Please seek advice from an Affinity Water catchment advisor to confirm or refer to MagicMap - <https://magic.defra.gov.uk/MagicMap.aspx>

Cutting the cover crop for silage later in the spring is permitted.

## **2.4 Is starter fertiliser or manure for the cover crop permitted?**

Do **not** apply any starter fertiliser or organic manure to the cover crop either before or after drilling.

## **2.5 Do I need to reduce nitrogen fertiliser rates for the following spring crop?**

Any nitrogen supplied by the cover crop should be taken into account when applying nitrogen to following crops.

Advice: A general rule of thumb is that nitrogen fertiliser applications to spring crops such as spring barley and maize could be reduced by 25-30 kgN/ha if they follow a cover crop.

## **3. Companion crops**

### **3.1 When do companion crops need to be established by, and how?**

There are different methods of establishing a companion crop. For example, some growers might broadcast a companion crop into the standing crop prior to harvest or into the stubble prior to drilling. Some growers with additional seed hoppers may drill it at the same time as drilling the cash crop.

Advice: Discuss choice of drilling method with your agronomist / adviser.

### **3.2 Which mixes of companion crops will be accepted?**

For the last five years, we have done a number of trials involving oilseed rape companion crops including berseem clover, buckwheat and fenugreek. Our data suggests that berseem clover can reduce concentrations of herbicides such as propyzamide in soil water at 40cm depth and could help reduce concentrations lost from fields.

Mixes including legumes such as berseem clover are said to fix atmospheric nitrogen for the crop. Furthermore, we had statistically significant results from trials showing a reduction in damage caused by cabbage stem flea beetle (CSFB) in buckwheat and berseem clover plots.

We are also interested in funding companions grown with any other crops, especially if this could provide a nitrogen benefit for the main crop. Examples of other companion crops of interest would be winter beans with oats and winter wheat with clover. Other combinations will be considered.

Advice: Discuss choice of companion crops with your agronomist / adviser.

## 4. On-farm trials support funding

### 4.1 Why are Affinity Water interested in funding on-farm field trials?

We have used field trials over the years to build evidence for the measures we chose to fund to protect water. For example, we funded multiple trials to see how effective cover crops were at fixing excess nitrate in soils compared to fields left as weedy stubble and how companion crops can reduce runoff of herbicides and reduce pest pressure.

Now we would like to hear your ideas and the approaches you wish to implement on farm which could help your business as well as ours.

### 4.1 What sort of trials will be considered for funding?

We will consider all ideas for field trials, however trials which align to our ambitions over the next five years to enhance soil health, protect groundwater quality from nitrate, improve water infiltration to the aquifer, prevent runoff of pesticides and increase biodiversity, are more likely to be funded.

Approaches which aim to reduce inputs, build soil organic matter, trial new approaches such as intercropping and agroforestry could be options to try.

Advice: On your application form, please state if you need any support with your field trial. We have experience working with trial consultants so if you need any support implementing a trial on your farm, please let us know.

Advice: Please state all delivery partners who may be interested in being part of your trial such as your agronomist / adviser and any neighbouring farmers. Trials which take a partnership approach, are more likely to be considered for funding.

### 4.2 How much funding is available if your trial is selected to be funded?

This will depend on the scale and topic of the trial. Please state all associated costs in your application form e.g. if control plots need to be sprayed off and compensation is required, please let us know in your summary on your application form. We will be in touch to discuss a potential trial delivery fee if your application is successful.

## 5. For more information

For more information please contact:

Bethany Eaton	07714 147420	<a href="mailto:bethany.eaton@affinitywater.co.uk">bethany.eaton@affinitywater.co.uk</a>
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We will process your personal data to administer your application to receive funding. For more information, please view our Privacy Notice at <https://www.affinitywater.co.uk/privacy/notice>