

Overview report: Building transparency and trust

An overview of the actions the department's Water Group has been taking to rebuild transparency and trust with NSW stakeholders

Background

The Department of Planning and Environment Water Group commissioned the Nous Group to provide a report, finalised in March 2021, recommending tangible actions to improve transparency and rebuild stakeholder trust across the state. The full report is available on our website. [LINK]

The project was undertaken in four key steps:

1. Review previous initiatives and reports
2. Understand actions already underway
3. Seek stakeholder input
4. Provide recommended actions.

The report has helped to guide the Water Group's thinking and actions that are intended to improve the experience of stakeholders that interact with the department. Three high level actions were recommended by Nous. This document provides a short update to actions that have been taken in response.

One of the seven guiding principles of the *NSW Water Strategy* (NWS), released in August 2021, is *transparency and accountability to engender community trust*. Actions and priorities in the NWS respond substantially to actions recommended by Nous.

We have taken a number of important steps to improve trust and transparency between stakeholders and the department, but we recognise that we still have a long way to go.

Re-orientate around the customer

Nous recommended:

- **Signal the 'shift'** at DPIE¹ that will encourage staff to prioritise the 'experience' of people's interactions with water agencies
- Articulate in **some form of customer charter** the specific, tangible behaviours it will commit to build trust and transparency
- **Demonstrate / report back** to stakeholders how DPIE has delivered on these commitments, consistently, over time.

¹ The Department of Planning and Environment was known as the Department of Planning, *Industry* and Environment at the time the report was finalised.

Progress

Senior leaders in the Water Group now routinely direct project teams to focus on how engagement activities can be designed to meet the needs of stakeholders rather than on the needs of the project, and help stakeholders interact more easily with the department. This is contributing to steady growth in staff focus on stakeholder experience.

Specific examples include:

Monthly engagement roundup webinars

We now hold monthly engagement roundups, delivered by webinar and open to anyone, to provide details on current programs and engagement activities. Participants are encouraged to ask questions before and during the webinars, and the recordings along with responses to questions are published online. This ensures that we are providing a consistent and complete overview to all stakeholder groups at the same time.

Water Infrastructure NSW engagement program

The newly formed Water Infrastructure NSW has invested heavily in engagement, to ensure that the infrastructure teams are well resourced to engage frequently and positively with communities and stakeholders in relation to infrastructure projects. This includes a team of dedicated Aboriginal Engagement specialists to ensure that the department can engage with Aboriginal peoples in culturally appropriate ways.

Town Water Risk Reduction Program

Learning from the challenges encountered by previous change programs, the department has adopted a robust partnership approach in developing and delivering this program. Key elements of the partnership approach include:

- A new dedicated team within the department
- Stakeholder advisory panel
- Commitment to listen
- Collaborative design
- Pursue voluntary or opt-in measures with stakeholders.

Stakeholder-led roundtable and regional conversations

In 2021 the department commenced a new style of stakeholder-led conversations including roundtable meetings of state-wide peak stakeholders and place-focused regional conversations. The meetings are conversational in style covering topics and issues raised by the stakeholders who participate. The department participates in the roundtable to serve and support the engagement needs of the stakeholder groups. Stakeholders have the opportunity to hear views from a diverse range of stakeholders and perspectives. The state-wide roundtable in December 2021 was attended by a broad range of peak stakeholder groups.

The regional conversations take the same approach, with a focus on the context and issues most relevant to those regions. Meetings so far have focused on the north coast and far north coast

regions of NSW. These meetings aim to identify and understand the most effective and preferred methods or channels of engagement and communication of water policy, planning and delivery, as well as identify opportunities to better partner with communities and organisations to achieve shared outcomes. A meeting of north coast stakeholders in September 2021 and again in August 2022 are the first of a planned series of conversations with regional coastal communities.

Connectivity stakeholder reference group

The Connectivity Stakeholder Reference Group was established to provide a range of diverse perspectives on the proposed approach to river connectivity. This was held ahead of broader public consultation on connectivity as part of the draft Western Regional Water Strategy.

The group consists of representatives from Aboriginal nations, water user groups, conservation groups, local government, the Murray Darling Basin Authority and the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office.

Model build workshops

The department is trialling an enhanced stakeholder engagement process for new major model builds, with a series of workshops to work through the modelling process in detail with stakeholders and technical experts. This is being trialled for the development of the new model for the Namoi Valley that is being built in the 'Source' platform, and three workshops have been held so far with a fourth to follow.

Stakeholder management

The department has invested in a stakeholder management tool, Borealis, to improve accountability and transparency and support better stakeholder engagement. Borealis is used by over 600 department staff and contractors to enable greater oversight and coordination of the Water Group's extensive engagement activities. By improving our knowledge and understanding of stakeholder issues, we may better respond to our customer and stakeholder needs. Borealis also supports us to align our work with engagement standards, such as the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2).

Responding to enquiries

We are focusing on improving how we respond to enquiries from customers and stakeholders. We have a 'no wrong door' approach to help customers and resolve issues. The approach includes removing barriers to information or services. We help customers and stakeholders navigate across various departments, agencies and councils involved in water management and service delivery and support them to find the right 'door'. DPE has initiated a Water Enquiries hub across water agencies to share knowledge and coordinate processes. We are aiming for purposeful stakeholder engagement by focusing on customer needs and being accountable for timely responses to customer enquiries.

Further work

The department has several other actions underway, as outlined in the NWS implementation plan. In particular, we will:

- Publish the findings of an independent review of the effectiveness of our stakeholder and community engagement activities every two years.
- Publicly report on progress of all commitments made in response to recommendations from inquiries, reviews and audits.
- Take an open by default approach to information and publication that describes when and how we publish information, based on an 'if not, why not' approach.

We are also developing a guideline on publication and information disclosure which will describe how we are implementing our open by default approach to information and publication, with specific commitments to the public.

Deal with capability and capacity gaps

Nous recommended:

- Deal systematically with the capacity and capability constraints to DPIE's trust and transparency ambitions
- Target gaps identified in key **capabilities, partnerships** with other agencies and supporting systems
- Manage this as a transformation project to help **give key stakeholders confidence** about DPIE's commitment to change.

Progress

The department has made significant progress and investment in engagement capabilities.

As outlined above, Water Infrastructure NSW, as an example, has invested heavily in a dedicated and skilled engagement team, including several Aboriginal staff skilled and experienced in engaging with Aboriginal peoples in a culturally appropriate way.

This complements the number of engagement specialists within the department who provide support to our project teams and support stakeholder engagement.

We have also set up a number of structures to ensure sound partnership with other agencies. Some examples include:

- A licensing and approvals taskforce working across Government to improve service delivery in the management of licences and approvals.
- A water sector leaders' group, including the heads of key water agencies and NSW Treasury meets regularly to ensure a consistent and efficient approach is taken by the sector to provide services to the people and environment of NSW.
- A new Roles and Responsibilities Agreement setting out the partnership approach between WaterNSW, the department's Water Group and the independent Natural Resources Access Regulator.

Further work

Throughout the NWS, we have committed to improvements and better partnership with other agencies and supporting systems. Most of the actions outlined in the NWS contribute to this recommendation. We are implementing these actions and reporting annually on NWS implementation.

Use the State Water Strategy to signal a ‘reset’

Nous recommended:

- Use the forthcoming engagements around the development of the State Water Strategy to **signal a ‘reset’** in how DPIE engages **design in processes to genuinely engage** with stakeholder priorities, up the ante in terms of transparency of engagement ‘outputs’, and signal the joint commitment of water agencies
- **Use the SWS as the ‘anchor’** that explains to stakeholders how the different parts of the water framework interconnect.

Progress

The NWS (referred to by Nous as the State Water Strategy) is a statewide, whole of sector, 20-year strategy that sets out clear priorities for the future of the NSW water sector. It includes a guiding principle of **transparency and accountability to engender community trust**

Priority 1 of the NWS is to ‘Build community confidence and capacity through engagement, transparency and accountability’.

The NWS draws together our priority work under a common framework, allowing stakeholders to better see how different aspects of our work and our projects relate to one another.