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# SERVICE STANDARDS SEMINAR

SUMMARY PAPER

AUGUST 2011

## **FOREWORD**

Setting service standards is difficult. It requires adherence to regulatory obligations and a balance between the objectives of Government, the water corporation and its customers. Affordability should be a key consideration.

With these issues in mind, the Essential Services Commission (the Commission) brought together a group of policy makers, consumer advocates, consultants and water utility practitioners at a seminar on 30 June 2011. This paper summarises the issues raised during the presentations and the discussion that followed.

This paper does not support any one idea over another. Its purpose is to stimulate further thought and analysis, leading water authorities to productive discussions with their customers prior to developing their Water Plan for the next regulatory period (five years commencing 1 July 2013).

The Commission welcomes any comments on the issues raised in this paper.

In September 2011, the Commission will publicly release a water authorities Guidance Paper, which will present the Commission's views on a range of issues for the next review.

David Heeps  
Chief Executive Officer  
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This paper summarises the key issues presented at the Service Standards Seminar held on 30 June 2011 that was organised by the Essential Services Commission (the Commission).

The purpose of the Seminar was to hear from a range of water industry participants and experts about some of the key themes, issues and opportunities that are considered important for setting service standards for the next regulatory period. It was intended that the Seminar would stimulate discussion and inform industry participants on recent developments and work on service standards.

The Seminar formed part of a series of seminars comprising the first step in the urban Water Plan review process which will be undertaken by the Commission and water businesses over the next two years. The Commission intends to release a Guidance Paper on service standards in the upcoming months.

The structure of this summary paper is as follows:

- policy context - expectations of the policy makers for service standards
- perspectives of the Commission, water businesses and customers on service standards for the next regulatory period
- directions in performance reporting.

This paper summarises key themes presented at the Seminar. The presentation slides from the seminar are available on our website and a list of speakers can be found in appendix A.

The first part of the seminar focussed on the policy context surrounding service standards and the expectations of the key policy makers around service standards for the next regulatory period.

### **2.1 Regulation of service standards**

It was noted that water service standards are subject to regulation under a range of mechanisms, including:

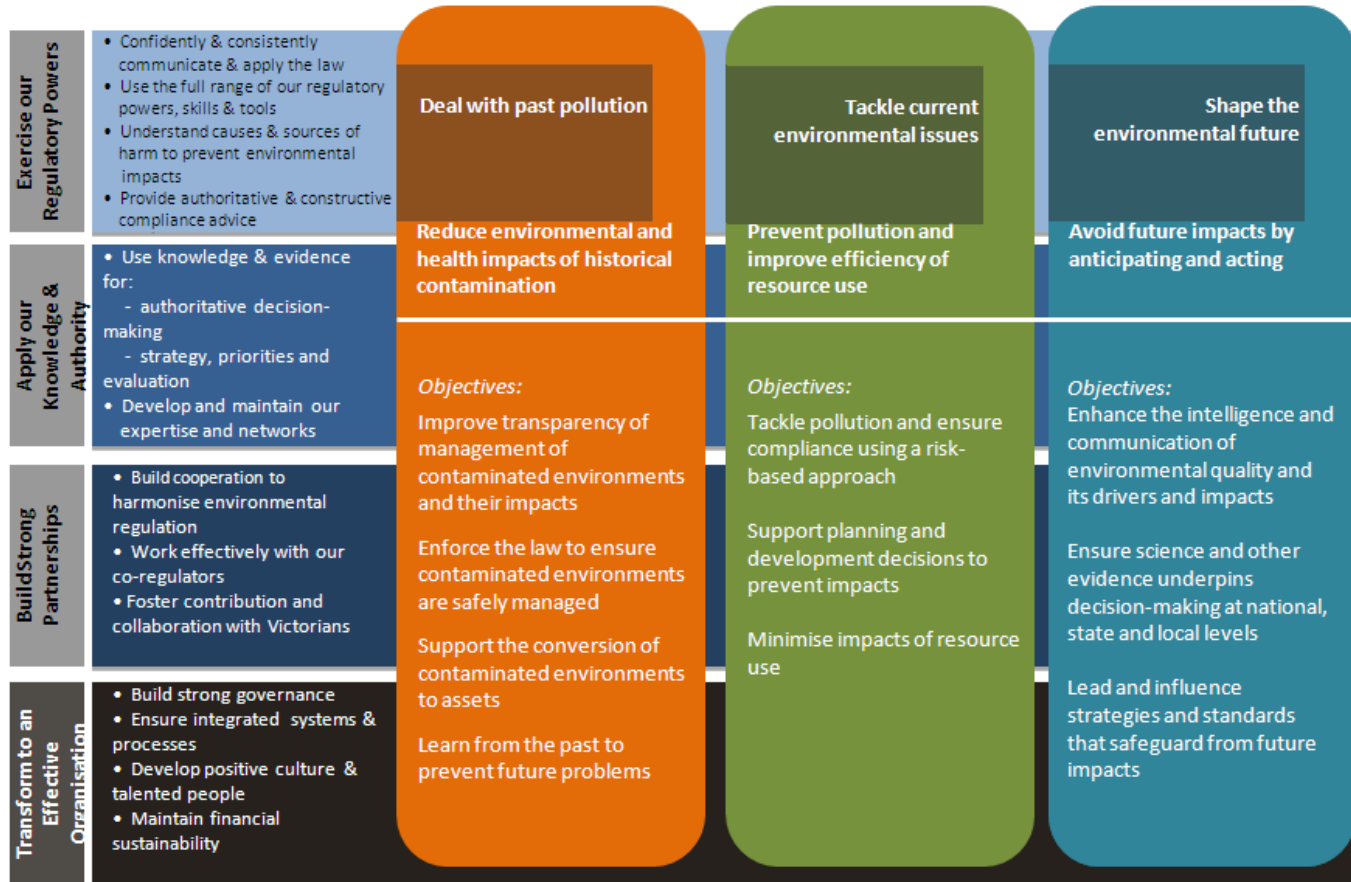
- customer service standards mandated by the Commission under section 4F of the Water Industry Act 1994
- drinking water standards imposed by the Department of Health under the Safe Drinking Water Act 2003 and the Safe Drinking Water Regulations 2005
- environmental standards imposed by the EPA under the Environment Protection Act 1970, principally in relation to discharges to the environment
- government policy imposed under the Statements of Obligations, for example backlog sewerage and country towns projects.

### **2.2 Environmental obligations for the water industry**

Stuart McConnell, Director Future Focus, from the Environment Protection Agency (EPA) presented on the environmental obligations of water businesses. The EPA is the environmental regulator, and as such, has obligations on the water industry. Stuart noted that recent environmental variability has highlighted the importance of preparedness for a variety of situations and planning contingencies for both drought and flooding rains.

The EPA has developed a five year plan with three key work streams: dealing with past pollution, tackling current environmental issues and shaping the environmental future. The five year plan is summarised in the figure 1.

Figure 1 – EPA Five Year Plan

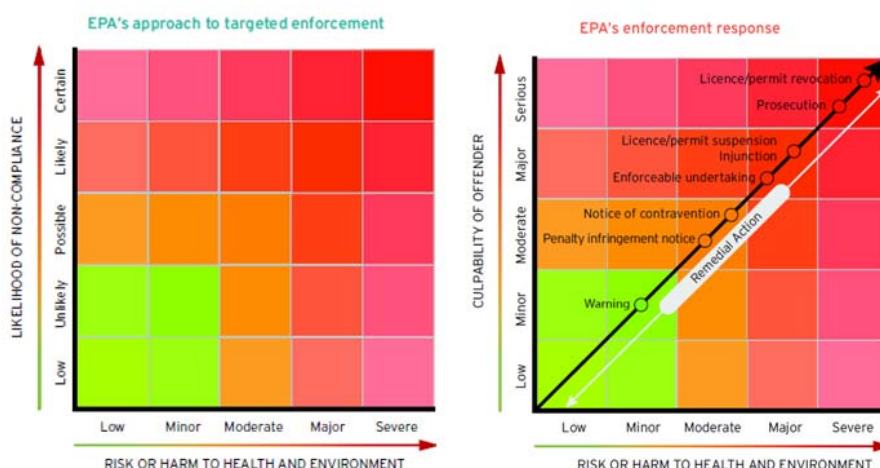


It was noted that the EPA is currently in the process of drafting an obligations statement for the water industry. This will assist water businesses in identifying funding needs for the next water plan period. A draft guidance paper will be released in July 2011 and will be followed by a final guidance paper in August 2011.

*New Compliance and Enforcement Policy*

The EPA released its new Compliance and Enforcement Policy in June 2011<sup>1</sup>. This policy articulates the EPA’s approach to carrying out compliance and enforcement activities as well as its methods and priorities for ensuring compliance with its’ Acts. This is summarised in figure 2.

**Figure 2 – EPA Compliance and Enforcement Policy**



The EPA is aiming to be more clear, transparent and predictable in following through water plan obligations. It will balance using its influence and enforcement tools to support water businesses to achieve compliance, uphold environmental standards and achieve higher environmental standards.

*Statutory Policy review*

The EPA is currently conducting a high level review of the Statutory Policy framework with the aim of providing more responsive, accessible guidelines with

<sup>1</sup> The EPA’s new Compliance and Enforcement Policy can be found on their website at <http://www.epa.vic.gov.au/compliance-enforcement/ce-policy.asp>

greater clarity of obligations. Consultation for the review is currently underway and submissions are due in August.

#### *EPA focus for the next water plan period*

The EPA will focus on a range of key issues in the future, including:

- the current status of compliance with current obligations
- occurrences of emergency discharge
- sewer overflows
- biosolids
- evidence of adaptive management.

### **2.3 Statement of Obligations**

Campbell Fitzpatrick, Executive Director Water Industry & Strategies, from the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) discussed the Draft Statement of Obligations (SoO), which is currently under review. The SoO's purpose is to provide greater clarity around government expectations. It was noted that there are several requirements for water businesses in the SoO, including:

- to prepare a Water Plan (this obligation is not applied anywhere else by the regulatory framework)
- to engage in water planning (for example prepare Water Supply Demand Strategy, drought response plans)
- create regulatory certainty and manage risk by applying standards (for example for dam safety, risk management)
- water businesses act collaboratively (for example in preparing Water Supply Demand Strategy, the Metropolitan Water Conservation and Recycling program).

Several key challenges faced by DSE in drafting the SoO were discussed. Policy objectives can sometimes be mutually exclusive, and it is a challenge to describe priorities across all parts of the state. It is also challenging to define obligations without sufficient information on the costs of meeting those obligations. As such, DSE has drafted the SoO at a higher level with the businesses expected to develop programs that reflect scale and local diversity to meet high level obligations.

Imposing obligations which have unacceptable price impacts was noted as a significant risk given the Government's concerns with cost of living pressures.



Other notable risks included leaving policy decisions to the water businesses and the economic regulator.

Following further consultation, the next draft of the SoO will be released in August 2011 before being finalised in October 2011.

## **2.4 Drinking water obligations for the water industry**

David Sheehan, Program Manager, from the Department of Health (DH) presented on the health obligations of water businesses. It was noted that DH expects water corporations to supply safe and fit-for-purpose drinking water, recycled water and wastewater services to their customers. Furthermore, it is expected that these services will be provided in a cost-effective manner, as long as cost-effectiveness does not compromise the principle objectives of protecting and/or enhancing public health.

DH administers the regulatory framework for drinking water services and also endorses the human health aspects of Class A water recycling schemes, and inputs into whole-of-government policy in relation to the use of alternative water supplies. It was mentioned that the regulatory framework for drinking water quality is now seven years old and a new set of drinking water regulations will commence in 2015.

The key driver for establishing the regulatory framework is to ensure that wherever in Victoria drinking water is supplied it is safe to drink. It was mentioned that the current regulatory framework has led to significant improvements in compliance to drinking water standards. Most water supplies were in compliance with water quality standards in 2009. DH suggested that despite the significant improvements in compliance, there are still water supplies where ongoing compliance to the state's water quality standards has yet to be achieved. These non-compliant supplies are predominately small rural supplies.

### **2.4.1 Specific drinking water regulatory expectations for Water Plan 3**

The specific regulatory expectations for Water Plan 3 were discussed in detail. The key points are outlined below:

#### *Compliance with water quality standards*

All drinking water supplies are expected to comply with the water quality standards detailed in the regulations. DH recognises that non-compliance issues are largely

confined to small rural supplies and that many non-compliant supplies will require innovative solutions to achieve compliance at an affordable cost.

#### *Multiple treatment barriers*

It was noted that it is imperative to implement multi-barrier treatment systems for all supplies that need them, this being the cornerstone of the risk-based approach to water quality management. Single-barrier supplies sourcing water from high-risk surface catchments are likely to present unacceptable risk to customers. It was mentioned that this issue also may require innovative solutions to meet affordability objectives.

#### *Issue of elevated total dissolved solids*

The issue of addressing water supplies with elevated levels of total dissolved solids (TDS) or salinity was also discussed. TDS is largely treated as an aesthetic parameter in the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines. Despite this, where high TDS water is being supplied as drinking water the expectation is that it will be fit for purpose (palatable).

#### *Monitoring of operational performance*

It was mentioned that the primary focus of risk management should be on ensuring treatment processes perform consistently. Reliance on water quality results collected at customer taps was suggested to be reactive rather than proactive. DH will consult widely with industry and other stakeholders in the lead up to 2015, when the next set of drinking water regulations commence. It was discussed that there will be a shift in focus to the monitoring of operational performance post 2015.

#### *Training of operational staff*

Operational staff manage and maintain the treatment barriers that help achieve fit-for-purpose water and wastewater. It is expected that they will have the skills and training to fulfil this role. It was noted that with an ageing workforce, predicted skills shortages and new technology, the importance of staff training will increase.

#### *Catchment management*

The importance of water catchment areas was discussed. Water catchment areas should be considered the first treatment barrier for water supplies. It was suggested that open catchments require high levels of stakeholder engagement (across agencies and with private landholders). It was noted that a Whole-of-Government approach is required to address this issue.

*Guidance for Water Plan 3*

DH has released a guidance note on their expectations for Water Plan 3 and would welcome early engagement with water corporations on Water Plan 3.

## 3 PERSPECTIVES ON SERVICE STANDARDS FOR THE NEXT REGULATORY PERIOD

A number of perspectives were presented on expectations in relation to service standards for the next regulatory period. Most views were around customer engagement by water businesses. Financial hardship was also a prominent topic in the context of recent rises in the price of water and other utilities.

### 3.1 Hardship

Elishia Harding, Associate Director Social Research, Hall & Partners presented an overview of their study into the experiences of water and energy customers experiencing financial hardship. This study was based on a total of 53 one-on-one interviews with customers lasting between 45 minutes to one hour. They found a great variety in customer perceptions of the service they were getting. Some respondents felt they were not getting even a basic level of customer service. Others reported they received a high level of service. Sometimes this variation occurred between customers of the same business. This suggested that there may sometimes be a disconnect between the policies of a water business and the service actually delivered by its different staff. The study report outlined the outcomes that led to customers viewing businesses as providing good customer service.

Jo Benvenuti, Executive Officer, Consumer Utilities Advocacy Centre (CUAC) pointed out that water price rises were occurring at the same time as large price rises in other essential services. Although efforts by water businesses to take into account customers in financial difficulty were recognised, CUAC expected increasing numbers of customers to face difficulty in paying their utility bills. CUAC believed that the hardship Guaranteed Service Level (GSL) payment developed by the Commission in 2010 should be extended to all urban water businesses, citing that of those customers who have had their water restricted in 2009-10, 17.5 per cent were concession card holders.

## 3.2 Customer engagement

Many participants emphasised the need for water businesses to engage with customers in proposing service standards for the next Water Plan. Customer engagement was essential in determining customers' willingness to pay for service improvements and ensuring that infrastructure decisions reflected community priorities. Water business' engagement with customers was also perceived as an important part of the overall service they provide to customers.

The Commission told the water businesses that—given the recent price increases—there would be increased focus on demonstrating willingness to pay for any increases in service standards or proposals for business-specific service standards. The onus would be on water businesses to satisfy the Commission that there is sufficient evidence that a substantial proportion of customers would be willing to pay for proposed new service standards.

CUAC expressed the view that decisions relating to augmentation and reliability must be based on the best available evidence about costs and benefits as well as close consultation with the communities served. Failing to do so could result in decisions being made that do not reflect community values and increasing concern over price rises.

CUAC also highlighted importance of frontline customer service, ranging from customer engagement to billing advice and payment options to flexibility and innovation in delivering services. Water businesses were urged to reassess frontline customer service as a fundamental part of the service mix they deliver.

In measuring customer service, Hall & Partners pointed out that there are both transactional and relational elements to be considered. Transactional elements related to the logistics of delivering service, while relational elements were concerned with the personal aspects of service delivery. Hall & Partners argued that regulators should focus on and assess transactional elements of customer service as these are more easily measurable. Their study found that some water businesses were providing transactional elements very well. Relational aspects, on the other hand, were difficult to assess. Nonetheless, their importance is highlighted by their finding that relational elements were critical in the way customers measured their experience. While it was acknowledged that hardship policies do attempt to address relational elements of customer service, there was evidence that in some cases, there may be a disconnect between water businesses' policy and what is being delivered by front line staff.

Paul Van Veenendaal, Managing Director Customer Service Benchmarking Australia (CSBA), supported Hall & Partners' finding about the importance of relational elements of customer service. Using data from the superannuation industry, CSBA argued that customers placed agent courteousness and prompt query resolution above investment performance. CSBA also pointed out that despite large investment in IT systems by water businesses, enquiries received via phone continue to rise.

The Commission attempts to address relational aspects in its performance reporting framework by employing 'mystery caller' surveys to assess the quality of customer service provided by water business.

### **3.3 Benchmarks for service standards**

The Commission made it clear that it did not expect service standards to decline. This did not mean it intended to excessively increase service standards either. Proposed improvements in service standards had to be accompanied by evidence that customers were willing to pay for the improved service level.

The benchmark should be set with regard to performance over the last five years. Anne Barker, Managing Director, City West Water expressed agreement with the move to a five year benchmark. In their opinion, the previous reference period of three years was too short to provide a reliable benchmark.

Some participants were in favour of using even longer time periods for benchmarks. City West Water suggested moving toward a ten year benchmark. The Commission is concerned that using a time period that is too long in setting benchmarks will fail to reflect the impact of improvements in service, resulting in service standards that are too easy for businesses to achieve and provide insufficient incentives for water businesses to maintain recent efficiency gains. The Commission is satisfied with a five year period for setting performance benchmarks, reflecting business performance over the prior regulatory period.

### **3.4 Guaranteed Service Level Payments**

The Commission expects all water businesses to propose Guaranteed Service Levels (GSLs) in their next Water Plan. GSLs enhance incentives for water businesses to meet service standards for all customers – because the cost of an assumed level of GSL payments is reflected in the businesses revenue requirement, there is an incentive to minimise the number of events that gives rise to payments. In the Commission's view, the performance reporting framework has

been in operation long enough to give businesses a reliable benchmark for setting GSLs. Gavin Hanlon, Managing Director, Coliban Water supported GSLs as providing a link between performance over the reporting period and customers who received the worst service. CUAC suggested that the hardship GSL should be extended to all urban water businesses.

Coliban Water viewed the next Water Plan as an opportunity to extend GSLs to capital expenditure. It was pointed out that current GSLs are mostly focussed on operating expenditure. Expanding GSLs to capital expenditure can increase customer satisfaction over the long run by providing incentives for businesses to direct investment to where it is needed.

### **3.5 Relevance of service standards**

The Commission questioned participants as to whether the current service standards were those that mattered most to customers. City West Water addressed this question, raising examples where customer priorities may not match with the performance benchmarks used by the Commission. City West Water also proposed a number of possible performance standards relating to sustainability and self-sufficiency of water supply as identified in section 4.2 of this paper.

Gary Drysdale, Licensing Manager, Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) described the process they used in developing their new performance indicators. The indicators in the National Water Initiative (NWI) were not considered sufficient as they only represented the lowest common denominator across the nation. Instead, IPART used extensive consultations with the public and specialist consultants to develop their proposed performance indicators.

## 4 DIRECTIONS IN PERFORMANCE REPORTING

Part 3 of the seminar covered a range of topics which included: Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal's (IPART) experience in regulating customer service standards and performance indicators in the New South Wales' water sector<sup>2</sup>, move to an outcome focused monitoring of performance, and the role of asset management and capital project delivery in meeting service standards or expectations.

### 4.1 Customer service standards and performance indicators – NSW public water utilities

Gary Drysdale from IPART presented on IPART's recent review of performance indicators and their experience in monitoring customer service standards and performance indicators in NSW.

Since the review IPART's licence regulation includes a more integrated whole of business system based approach that is focused on:

- outcomes
- annual risk based operating audits
- exception compliance reporting
- and other licence compliance and performance reporting.

The customer service standards adopted by IPART following their 2006 review of service standards, apply to water pressure, unplanned interruptions, multiple unplanned interruptions, sewer overflows and multiple sewer overflows. In addition to the aim of cost neutrality, IPART aimed to apply two general principles when setting targets for customer service standards, including:

- the amended customer service standards should not provide for any diminution of standards but should provide an incentive for utilities to retain a strong focus on the efficiency and effectiveness of operations, and

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<sup>2</sup> Sydey Water and Hunter Water only.



- the targets should provide a buffer (headroom) against unforeseen adverse events above the levels of sustained recent performance.

#### *IPART's review of performance indicators*

IPART is currently finalising a review of performance indicators reported by metropolitan water utilities. The main objectives of the review are:

- to streamline and rationalise indicators to improve relevance to regulatory oversight
- improve the consistency of indicators to allow comparison between utilities
- reduce the burden of regulation by minimising the reporting overlap with other regulators (Office of Environment and Heritage and NSW Health)
- remove obsolete indicators and duplication, both within IPART's indicator set and between IPART indicators and National Water Initiative indicators.

The current performance indicators are used to monitor utility performance in the areas of infrastructure operation, environmental management and customer service. The review had a limited scope as the NWI indicators are unable to be reduced. However, the proposed indicators under the current review are considerably reduced. The number of indicators being proposed include:

- less than 20 for infrastructure system operation (to cover planned and unplanned water interruptions, water pressure, sewerage overflows)
- 12 or more (10 hardship indicators to be further reviewed) for customer service (to cover complaint resolution, call centre responsiveness, payment plans, disconnection/ flow restrictions and payment assistance vouchers)
- 11 for environment (to cover water quality in catchment areas, electricity consumption used by water/sewerage infrastructure, waste reuse/recycling, native vegetation management). There will be more reliance on system based regulation, with more report based reporting rather than less single data reporting
- no changes to water quality measures.

## **4.2 Potential new measures**

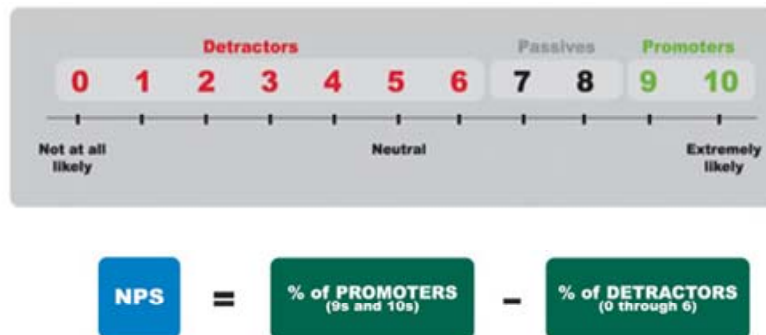
Several of the presenters suggested potential new measures to be included in performance reports.

CSBA outlined two potential methods for measuring customer satisfaction, including:

- Net Promoter Score – on a scale of 1 to 10 how likely customers are to recommend a company
- Ease of doing business – how easy is it to do business with a company?

Coliban Water also mentioned that they have found Net Promoter Scores are a useful tool for driving improvements in their customer satisfaction, as seen in figure 3.

**Figure 3 – The Net Promoter Score**



CSBA noted several organisations have successfully utilised Net Promoter Scores to assess and drive improvements in the levels of customer satisfaction. CSBA's work has found that first call resolution is a key driver for customer satisfaction and Net Promoter scores.

City West Water also suggested several potential new measures, including:

- using water more than once - percentage of total water sales, that is recycled water, and percentage of water used by customers that is recycled (internally or externally sourced)
- cities becoming more self-sufficient in their water supply – percentage of water sales sourced within Melbourne's boundary
- more liveable and attractive places to live – percentage of licence area with a servicing strategy for a Healthy Urban Habitat

- giving communities a say in planning decisions around water - number of community forums run, and accessibility of performance and planning data to the community
- strong focus on alternative water sources – percentage of total water sales that is non-potable, and supply volume of non-potable water projects on the drawing board.

### **4.3 Incentives**

CUAC considered that, for water monopolies, there needed to be incentives to provide good service. A suggestion was that water businesses be given a financial bonus for providing good service. Poor service could similarly be met with penalties.

The Commission's current performance reporting framework provides incentives for water businesses to provide high levels of customer service through competition by comparison. The Commission remains open to the possibility that stronger incentives need to be in place to foster robust competition amongst the water businesses.

### **4.4 The role of asset management in meeting service standards**

David Francis, Associate Director, Strategic Economics Consulting Group (SECG) presented on the role of asset management in meeting service standards. SECG had two key messages, including:

- asset management has an important role to play in ensuring water businesses' service standards are correctly identified, achieved and remained to be relevant
- best practice asset management will always include customer engagement processes.

It was discussed that service standards are the key drivers of asset management systems and processes. To meet service standard targets, businesses will have to propose capital and operating expenditure. Long term asset planning aims to meet service objectives related to water supply/security, and risk assessment and cost benefit analysis models that aim to meet service objectives related to network reliability.

For operating expenditure, asset maintenance processes and asset operational procedures are structured such that they meet system reliability objectives and environmental objectives, respectively.

The presenter discussed some of the current and future issues about service standards. His view is that in deciding whether to maintain, improve or reduce service performance, it will be important for water businesses to benchmark their performance against other similar businesses, and to justify their expenditure decisions. He also discussed that water businesses should ensure that service standards:

- remain relevant to what customers want and are willing to pay for, and to the water businesses themselves (by reflecting advances in asset management)
- continue to account for future challenges such as climate change, carbon pricing, decentralisation, third party access
- can be met in a constrained environment (stable prices, legislative changes).

The presenter suggested that the asset management processes can help to address the above issues by:

- having a structured process to support decisions (risk assessments, options analysis/cost benefit analysis, assessment of asset performance/condition)
- having a customer engagement process (determine consumer willingness to pay, establish consultative committees, account for wider social/economic context)
- undertaking long term asset planning (with processes adjusted to meet future challenges)
- having a robust optimisation processes (delivering the same service level for less, managing more assets for the same, balancing priorities/trade offs and optimising asset performance).

#### **4.5 The role of capital project delivery in meeting service expectations**

David Lynch, Principal Consultant, Sinclair Knight Merz (SKM) presented on the role of capital project delivery in meeting service expectations. SKM's key messages included:

- there should be a very clear linkage between outcomes/proposed works and expenditures to service standards or business objectives

- the onus on making a case for capital projects lies with water businesses and the role of water businesses is to reduce any ambiguity.

He also noted there is greater onus to prove a case when works are 'altruistic' endeavours.

It was discussed that water businesses could demonstrate that linkage in various steps which include:

- clearly articulated drivers
- formulating an overall strategy
- gaps and relevant information assessment
- clear prioritisation which is risk-based
- options analysis that shows economic efficiency
- appropriate implementation of management plan
- assessment of expenditure impacts/value assessment
- continuous review process and improvement.

SKM observed that currently, there is a disproportionately low amount of time spent in planning phase, thereby putting pressure on later phases of project delivery. It was suggested the water businesses should challenge themselves to assess projects with prudent, reasonable, robust and economically efficient tests.

The life cycle of capital projects delivery starts with justification on basis of outcomes achieved (readily assessable) related to service obligations, followed by robust and realistic assessment of timelines (from planning through completion stages). It was also noted that there should be an assessment of historical performance (benefits, timing, evidence of adoption and effects of improvement initiatives) and development of a delivery strategy.

#### *Timing for project/program works*

SKM noted that there should be clarity around objectives and regulatory obligations. Questions that need to be raised are:

- Why do the project now?
- How robust is the demand assessment?
- What if we do not do the project now?

SKM reiterated that the water businesses should not just stage the 'Rolls Royce' solution but consider other low cost options to deal with initial demands.

### *Options definition and selection*

SKM outlined the imperative to identify and robustly test<sup>3</sup> a sensible suite of options for capital projects. It is important to justify ‘high technology’ projects well and test against other means to achieve the same outcomes (for example non-infrastructure based options). It was suggested that costings should be risk based and costs and benefits tested against benchmarks to demonstrate that expenditure is efficient.

### *Delivery of innovative capital projects*

SKM noted that risk assessment of project costs is critical. It was observed that currently this is not well done. Businesses sometimes have an optimistic view of project costs or benefits, distorted project justification and sometimes scenario and sensitivity analysis are treated similarly. Other critical factors to consider when delivering innovative capital projects are to review design standards and delivery (for example bedding material, welding techniques on Sugarloaf pipeline) and to ensure that previous project/works program learnings were captured and applied.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, for water recycling (in absence of explicit regulatory targets) – test against normal supply options, decentralised vs expansion of existing “centralised” systems.

## APPENDIX A – LIST OF SPEAKERS

Dr Ron Ben-David - Chairperson, Essential Services Commission

Mr Andrew Chow – Director Local Government and Water, Essential Services Commission

Ms Anne Barker – Managing Director, City West Water

Mr Campbell Fitzpatrick – Executive Director Water Industry & Strategies, Department of Sustainability and Environment

Mr David Francis – Associate Director, Strategic Economics Consulting Group

Dr David Lynch – Principal Consultant, Sinclair Knight Merz

Mr David Sheehan – Program Manager, Department of Health

Ms Elisha Harding – Associate Director, Social Research, Hall and Partners | Open Mind

Mr Gary Drysdale – Licensing Manager, IPART

Mr Gavin Hanlon – Managing Director, Coliban Water

Ms Jo Benvenuti – Executive Officer, Consumer Utilities Advocacy Centre

Mr Paul van Veenendaal – Managing Director, Customer Service Benchmarking Australia

Mr Stuart McConnell – Director Future Focus, Environment Protection Authority