

18 June 2021

Kate Symons
Chairperson
Essential Services Commission

Via email: [REDACTED]

Dear Ms Symons,

Getting to Fair Strategy

Congratulations on producing the Essential Services Commission's draft strategy, *Getting to Fair*, focused on providing support to consumers experiencing barriers to essential services in Victoria.

We are collaborating with WSAA and VicWater on a sector-wide response to the draft strategy, however I also wanted to send a direct reply on behalf of the region we service.

We think the strategy is well considered and timely. We acknowledge and applaud your leadership on the approach to defining vulnerability. Building a shared appreciation that vulnerability is an experience rather than a label is an important distinction. This important emphasis will help to alleviate stigma and ultimately boost engagement as it more accurately reflects how we all experience our lives.

We are committed to meeting the water services needs of our communities as we respond to climate change and population growth. Our region needs further water services investment noting that we have been under-renewing relative to industry benchmarks and we are already feeling acute impacts of climate change as evidenced by a 53 percent reduction in inflows to our storages on the Coliban River. We have taken on more long-term debt this financial year and we are taking on further debt next year as we ramp up our capital program from \$30 million to \$40 million. Coliban Water's debt is approaching \$400 million.

We have commenced our consultation and engagement processes to support our customers 2023-2028 Pricing Determination. At the centre of the process will be key questions for customers as to how we meet the climate and population adaptation challenge while ensuring that our prices remain affordable and that we pay special attention to supporting people who are experiencing vulnerability. We will never leave anyone behind. Our track record of supporting customers through thick and thin is well demonstrated.

We note that your strategy calls for 'universal and inclusive engagement' and that updated guidance will be provided later this year in relation to this priority. We will strive to embed these expectations in our business processes.

A snapshot from Coliban Water:

- 28% of the customers in our region have registered their concession with us.
- We are continuing a proactive approach and encouraging customers to access our support programs.
- Our support programs remain open to all customers, not just residential.
- We have improved our reporting capability in our new customer and billing system is supporting a refined approach to segmentation and program implementation.
- We are working with Traditional Owners at a program and organisational level to ensure connection, relevance and deep partnerships.
- We understand that the federal government coordinated investigation for an industry funded financial counselling model has been placed on hold. We will be seeking alternative partnerships to support customers in the interim.
- We are a contributing member of WSAA's working group on vulnerability, which is building a framework to support water businesses to implement programs that support customers experiencing financial challenges.

We are focused on ensuring fair access which starts with connecting, engaging and deep listening to our customers.

I acknowledge the cultural shift this strategy seeks to make, and we too have recently redefined what we stand for at Coliban Water with a new Culture Statement of '**Earn the Customer, Own the risk and Act**'. We are now embedding this cultural intent across the business and asking our customers and stakeholders to hold us to account against it.

Yours sincerely,



Damian Wells
Managing Director