

Organisation of the Year Entry

Share your thoughts. Shape our future. Engaging Wannon

Introduction

Wannon Water is a state government-owned, not-for-profit water and sewerage provider servicing South West Victoria.

Every day, we supply our region with sustainable water services while leading our communities towards a healthier, more prosperous future. It's a commitment that we're proud to make to the region we call home.

We're here for our 44,000 customers, and we believe they have the right to be involved in decisions that affect them. Their feedback helps us understand their needs and expectations of us, and enables us to make better, more informed decisions for our business, our customers and our wider community.

Driven by this belief, we recently completed our most extensive engagement program ever. The insights informed the development of our 202–28 Price Submission to the Essential Services Commission (ESC), a plan setting out our priorities, services and prices for the next five years. This multiyear engagement was the culmination of a complete transformation of our approach to customer and community engagement over five years. It was rated as 'Leading' by the ESC, the highest level possible in their price review process.

Our transformational journey began in 2017 after we had completed the customer engagement for our previous 2018–23 Price Submission. We learnt much through this process and understood that, if we were to become a truly customer-centric organisation, we needed a more structured and robust approach to prioritising two-way engagement and embedding customer insights into how we do business.

While we had long delivered regular engagement activities (customer surveys, a Community Advisory Committee, relationships with developers and industries, project-specific engagements, etc.), we now see these were add-ons, either to test decisions that had already largely been made or to meet the requirements of an approvals process.

With rising government and regulator expectations for engagement, coupled with our new organisational strategic direction – *beyond water for strong communities* – the time was right for a more mature approach to the way we engage. And that would require significant cultural change.

Designing a framework for success

In 2017, with support from expert consultants, we developed a new Community Engagement Framework for Wannon Water. It is based on best practice engagement principles, including the IAP2 Core Values, and reflects our pride in the role we play within the region. At its heart is a strong commitment to meaningful and genuine engagement across all levels of the organisation, and to providing greater opportunities for community engagement in our region.

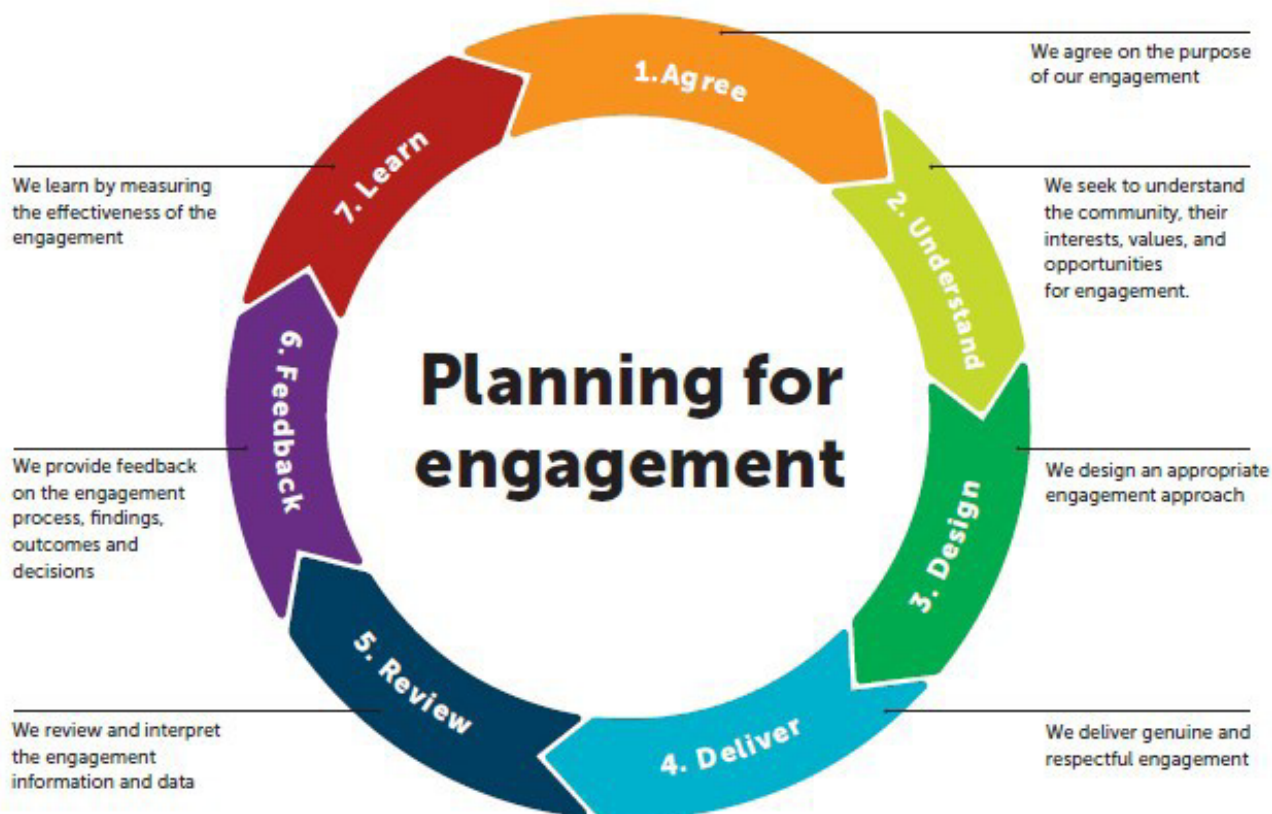
From this, our definition of community engagement was born – *a genuine process of working with people to build capacity, strengthen relationships and inform decisions* – as well as our seven-step process for designing and delivering engagement (see diagram page 2) that serves us to this day.

'Resourcing engagement is a strategic and worthwhile investment. People have a right to shape their public institutions, so we have embedded engagement as a critical element of our strategic planning and decision-making. Our Board seeks to understand what our customers and communities want, and we take their opinions seriously.'

Ken King, Acting Chair, Wannon Water Board

The framework and its accompanying toolkit, including principles, tools and techniques, influenced a fundamental shift in our mindset that recognised:

- Engagement is a part of everyone's role at Wannon Water, not just our dedicated community engagement staff



- Strong engagement is consistent with our desire to strengthen communities through social responsibility initiatives and partnerships
- Engagement should be planned and embedded at the outset of a project, not bolted on at the end
- Engagement reduces risks and adds value to our projects by bringing new insights
- Our customers and communities have the right to be involved in decisions affecting them.

Customer and community feedback helps us make better decisions and mitigates our strategic risk of being unable to anticipate changing community expectations of our business.

An annual engagement program – the Wannon Water Engagement Cycle

With the framework established and training in its application delivered across our organisation, the necessary buy-in, eagerness and skills were in place to design a new landscape aligned with the 2018–23 pricing period and underpinned by our new definition and commitment to engagement.

The resulting Wannon Water Engagement Cycle (WVEC) is a comprehensive program that ensures:

- Customer and community engagement is an annual and ongoing process to:
 - Inform and shape our annual strategic and financial plan (our Corporate Plan)
 - Provide iterative input to the development of future five-year price submissions to the ESC

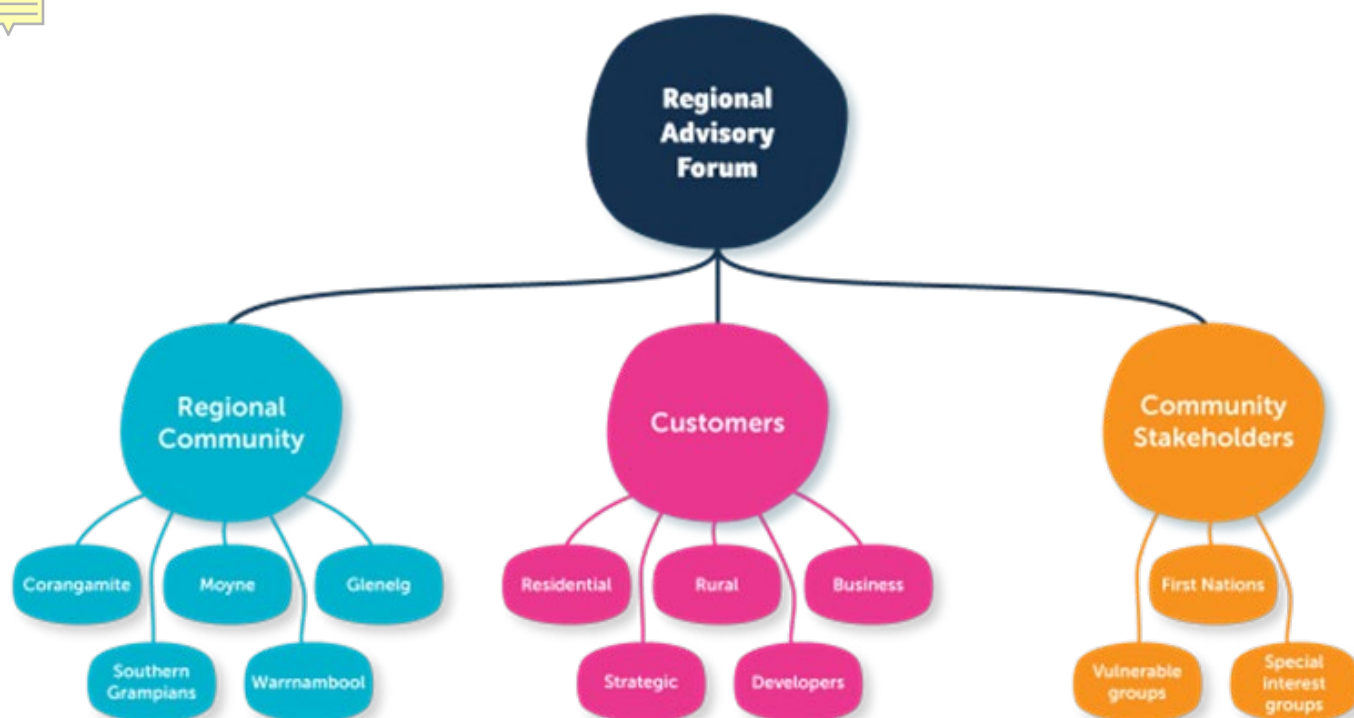
- A clear, consistent and practical organisation-wide approach to best practice engagement
- Engagement is inclusive of the diversity of voices in our region (geographical, customer types, demographics, First Nations people, vulnerable groups and special interest groups).

The WVEC provides regular tracking of customer insights and expectations throughout a pricing period, producing better outcomes for customers by being responsive and able to adapt as their needs change. It guides us on our quest for ongoing performance stewardship, building ongoing relationships with key stakeholder groups and integrating customer-driven practice into our decision-making.

A key element of this new program involved establishing a peak customer and stakeholder body to oversee the implementation of the WVEC and our wider engagement approach. The Regional Advisory Forum (RAF) comprised 12 volunteers reflecting customer and community diversity across our service area. They met twice a year throughout the 2018–23 pricing period to:

- Co-design engagement for each WVEC
- Provide greater visibility of issues relevant to customer and community groups
- Hear, discuss and provide feedback on annual engagement findings
- Review the penultimate price submission engagement insights and our draft submission.

Each annual WVEC includes a range of stakeholder groups (see diagram page 3).



Engagement priorities for a given WVEC are set during the 'Agree' phase of our framework then shaped into a series of topic modules. We then rotate these modules across discrete audiences as appropriate to ensure all priorities of the WVEC are adequately covered.

The WVEC has also introduced additional engagement tools, including monthly pulse surveying of customers, online engagement opportunities, and pop-up engagements tailored for specific local communities across our region.

2023-28 Price Submission – a multiyear engagement

From 2018 to 2022, guided by our new engagement framework and WVEC, we delivered our most extensive, adaptable and inclusive program of engagement ever, to inform our 2023-28 Price Submission. This comprehensive four-year engagement – delivered in addition to specific project engagements – sought to understand the needs and expectations of our customers and stakeholders, including the broader community who benefit from our services.

Employing a unique and iterative funnel approach (see diagram opposite), we obtained, tested and refined the final engagement insights over time from more than 7,700 instances of customer engagement. This number represents 17 per cent of our total customer numbers and 7.7 per cent of the total population in our region.

While we incorporated interim customer insights into each of our annual corporate plans, for the five-year price submission, we delivered early and broad engagement in 2018 and 2019; more targeted engagement in 2020 and 2021; then a deeper, deliberative engagement (a Community Panel) in 2022 that included a review of all customer insights derived from those 7,700+ instances of engagement since 2017.

In 2021, we also commissioned a Diving Deeper desktop review of all customer feedback since 2017 to appropriately narrow the final engagement topics in the crucial lead-up to the new price submission.

By working this way over multiple years, we have been able to minimise engagement fatigue without compromising the breadth and depth of customer voices in our price submission development. This approach also provides more steady, regular and robust tracking of customer priorities and expectations across a price period (and greater engagement overall) compared to intensive engagement only conducted in the lead-up to a new price submission.



Consistent with best practice, the evolving impacts of COVID-19 and the changing needs of our customers and community, we also tailored multiple engagement tools and materials to suit the discrete needs of different audiences. We ensured our engagement was accessible and inclusive for First Nations people and for people experiencing vulnerability.

The continual refinements of insights over multiple years shaped our customer outcomes, capital works, operational priorities and, ultimately, the customer tariffs in our submission.

Our commitment to IAP2 Core Values

Our annual WVEC and our commitment to engagement demonstrate Wannon Water's continuous evolution as a customer-centric organisation. We continually strive for excellence in engagement. The following table details our commitment to the IAP2 Core Values.

IAP2 Core Value	Wannon Water commitment
Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.	<p>We live our definition of engagement – ‘a genuine process of working with people to build capacity, strengthen relationships and inform decisions’ – both in our strategic environment and at a project level.</p> <p>Customer and community engagement is an integral feature in delivering our annual Corporate Plan, five-yearly Price Submission and 50-year Urban Water Strategy. Our timing and approach to each of these key strategic decision points ensure feedback from customers and community is considered by our Board and its impact is embedded in our strategy.</p> <p>Our Community Engagement Framework is embedded in our Project Management Framework and project managers are trained how to use it. This ensures customers are engaged appropriately throughout each project. A key example is our Great Tasting Water Project, which aims to improve the drinking water quality for Portland, Heywood and Port Fairy. Strong customer engagement was a critical element in this project receiving \$26.1 million from the National Water Grid Fund.</p>
Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.	<p>Our framework, based on the IAP2 Core Values, ensures there is a substantial ‘Agree’ phase at the start of any engagement. This crucial step maps out the scope and goals of the engagement, as well as the negotiables and non-negotiables.</p> <p>Our commitment to engagement ensures feedback is genuinely taken into consideration. A most significant example relates to our recent 2023–28 Price Submission, whereby our Board took on all recommendations put forward by our deliberative Community Panel. For more information see our 2023–28 Price Submission Engagement Report.</p>
Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognising and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision-makers.	<p>Our ‘Agree’ phase also clearly maps out the negotiables and non-negotiables for a decision upfront when planning an engagement. This is critical in setting expectations for those we are engaging and being clear about any constraints upon decision-makers.</p> <p>Considering different stakeholder interests and needs is an important part of designing our engagements. Some tools we have used, for example, are more helpful for disparate stakeholders to better understand each other's positions (e.g. deliberative approaches or stakeholder reference groups) than others (e.g. individual surveys).</p> <p>Providing feedback on the outcomes of engagement to those we have engaged is also an important way of demonstrating the different positions and concerns of disparate stakeholders.</p>

Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.	The 'Understand' phase of our framework includes stakeholder mapping in relation to the engagement goals. Importantly, it also considers how best to engage different stakeholders. For example, we consider how we might 'go to' our engagement audience to make it easier for them to participate (e.g. attending existing group meetings or events) rather than expecting them to 'come to' us. We also consider what the likely interest and ability might be for different stakeholders to participate via particular engagement methodologies. The outcome of this approach is demonstrated in our strong levels of engagement from diverse groups.
Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.	Our Regional Advisory Forum provides advice and feedback on how we might best engage with particular stakeholder groups. This forum itself is composed of diverse stakeholders (e.g. geographic, identity, socioeconomic background, organisation type and so on.) They provide this valuable input to our annual WVEC in the middle of each year before we undertake the detailed design of our engagement.
Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.	<p>This is a critical component of our engagements and is often needed given the complexity of some of our projects and pricing arrangements. A key example of our commitment to this is the comprehensive information and briefings we provided to our deliberative Community Panel, whose feedback and recommendations informed our 2023-28 Price Submission. Panel members received multiple in-person and online briefings on the topics they were being asked to consider, along with background papers and access to more information on our 'Engage & Explore' online portal to dive into more deeply as they desired. This information was prepared in plain English and with accessibility principles in mind. Importantly, it was also spread out over six weeks, providing opportunities for questions of clarification.</p> <p>We also allow around 25 per cent of the time in our annual face-to-face engagements with community groups to provide background information to help build their understanding on discrete engagement topics. We do this at the start of the session before delving into deeper questions.</p>
Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.	The 'Feedback' phase of our framework is all about closing the loop with those we have engaged. An example in action is that, for our annual engagements over the past five years, we have reported back to those we engaged about how their feedback has been considered and incorporated into our annual Corporate Plan.

Leadership

In developing our Community Engagement Framework, it was important that we had support from the most senior levels and buy-in from across the organisation.

We took a co-design approach to developing the framework, working closely with employees representing multiple business units, including members of the Executive Team, then delivered training to an even wider group of employees to apply to their own work.

The framework brings to life the IAP2 Core Values in a practical approach to designing, delivering and applying information from engagements in our day-to-day work. It follows a logical sequence of seven phases: *Agree > Understand > Design > Deliver > Review > Feedback > Learn*. The completion of each phase is critical for informing subsequent phases.

'Wannon Water's Community Strategy, Partnering for Stronger Communities 2018-2023, has been instrumental in fostering shared value and strengthening relationships between Wannon Water, its customers, stakeholders and the broader community. The strategy's focus on creating shared value, community engagement and partnership has truly set a new standard for best practice approaches to community and stakeholder engagement.'

Regional Advisory Forum member 2023

The seven-step framework is now so embedded in the way we work that its language is commonplace in our organisation. Employees often refer to conducting an 'Agree' or a 'Learn' workshop as part of delivering their projects.

Our Board uses the framework to develop their wider stakeholder engagements with government, regulators and large businesses. Our executives look for the use of the framework in projects and strategic planning, and are critical participants in the ‘Agree’ and ‘Feedback’ phases for our annual WPECs with our customers and community.

The insights from our annual WPECs are reported to the Board, incorporated in our annual strategic planning, and presented to all managers for them to consider our customers’ priorities when preparing their business unit budgets for the next financial year.

For our 2023–28 Price Submission, our Board set the maximum level of customer influence at ‘collaborate’

‘Awesome to see those at the top listening to the people on the ground.’

Community Panel member reviewing the draft price submission

(IAP2 spectrum), recognising that it, a ministerially appointed board, is ultimately responsible for pricing outcomes. However, the Board made a strong commitment to give customer feedback a high priority in their decision-making. Tellingly, the Board adopted all recommendations from our deliberative Community Panel and all final customer insights when finalising the submission.

Satisfaction

Our definition of engagement – a genuine process of working with people to build capacity, strengthen relationships and inform decisions – continually guides our practices.

It’s with this in mind that we have built stronger, more meaningful relationships with our Regional Advisory Forum, deliberative Community Panel, and community groups, taking the time to build their understanding of complex water, sewerage and pricing matters to help them to provide us with informed feedback. The response from those forums has been overwhelmingly supportive, with many expressing high satisfaction with their involvement with Wannon Water.

For our wider community engagement, we adopt a mixed methodology tailored to suit the needs of our audience and make engaging with us easier. From surveys to focus groups and pop-up sessions to more involved deliberative processes, our approach is to design engagements that suit the audience. This way, we provide opportunities for everyone to participate regardless of age, background, ability or access to technology. This is guided by a thorough consideration, during our framework’s ‘Understand’ phase, of the most appropriate stakeholders to engage to meet our objectives.

We are also particular about being sensitive to the needs of our audience and being flexible in our approach. For example, as restrictions associated with

the COVID-19 pandemic continued into the latter stages of our price submission engagement, we were very clear with our Community Panel that, in response, we would limit the number of in-person days to two and incorporate online and other activities to support the overall process. Similarly, in 2021, we worked closely with community service organisations to understand the current impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable customers, and designed an approach that would capture their voice but satisfy their needs during a period of disruption.

Our customers tell us they value the opportunity to provide their views on services, often rating our engagement work at a high standard. This sentiment is captured via a short survey of those customers who participated in our direct engagement sessions. We have consistently recorded high levels of satisfaction for this indicator.

Percentage of surveyed customers satisfied with the engagement process

2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
92%	97%	100%	92%

Our stakeholders and partners also hold similar views about Wannon Water’s engagement with community. Organisations who provided feedback in our 2018 and 2021 Stakeholder Perceptions Reviews rated our engagement with community at an average 3.96 out of 5 (79.1 per cent).

During 2018–22 we had more than 7,700 instances of customer engagement in our strategic engagement activities, such as our WPEC. This represents 17 per cent of our total customer numbers and 7.7 per cent of the total population in our service region. We also delivered engagements on myriad projects during this period.

‘I think it has been a really thorough engagement cycle looking back over the last few years...I think myself and other organisations have a lot to learn.’

Regional Advisory Forum member, July 2022

Staff participation

Our co-design approach to developing the Community Engagement Framework involved employees in varying roles across the business.

While at times we contract consultants to support particular engagements, largely we deliver our engagement program and approach with our existing employees. We also adopt a distributed approach to engagement design and delivery, with all project managers understanding they have responsibility for the engagement associated with their projects, supported to varying degrees by our dedicated engagement staff, depending on the nature and scale of the project.

Once our framework was designed in 2017, we delivered training in its principles and processes, as well as engagement facilitation skills, to a wide group of employees to build their capacity to apply it to their own work.

In the spirit of continuous improvement, we recently reviewed and updated the framework based on staff feedback. We delivered a further round of employee training and best practice community engagement in 2022. This distributed model of engagement across our organisation provides an additional advantage in that our employees, by delivering their own engagement, get to hear first-hand what our customers are saying. It builds the capacity both of our project managers and their audience in delivering better outcomes for our community.

‘Wannon Water’s multidisciplinary leadership team believes and expresses that the investment in quality community engagement leads to better outcomes for the organisation and the community. The value and importance Wannon Water staff place on engagement learnings is evident in their day-to-day approach to their work. From the CEO at a strategic level, to customer-facing teams across the region, community engagement is treated as important, and the learnings as invaluable to continuous improvement at all scales.’

Customer and consultant 2023

Other staff are involved in our engagement activities by attending focus groups as subject matter experts or representing Wannon Water at events or pop-up engagement sessions and talking directly with customers and community members to collate their feedback. This ‘go-to crew’ is composed largely of employees who volunteer to take part in these activities to make a difference in our community.

Since 2017, more than 100 of our employees have been actively involved in engagement activities and/or have undertaken training in our framework. This is equivalent to almost half (46 per cent) of our workforce.

Track record

Established in 2017, our Community Engagement Framework has been in place ever since, with an enhanced version released in 2022 following an internal review of its format and effectiveness.

This reflects the ongoing evolution of our engagement landscape and is critical to our pursuit of ongoing performance stewardship in this field.

Both the framework and the WWEC are fundamental to the development of our five-year price submission. We have produced two Price Submission Engagement Reports in the last five years that reflect our maturity and commitment to genuine engagement over time. We take great pride in the fact that our most recent price submission engagement program was rated by the ESC as ‘Leading’, the highest rating possible.

Each year we also deliver reports on our annual WWEC activities and customer insights, aligned with our annual corporate plan. Embedding public feedback in our decision-making in this fashion is a critical part of the annual corporate planning process and our five-yearly planning cycle.

This is supported by project-specific engagements, such as the Great Tasting Water Project aimed at improving the aesthetic water quality in Portland, Port Fairy and Heywood.

‘Always impressed with the quality of your stakeholder consultation and communication back to this group – always appreciate the high level of knowledge you have of your subject area.’

Regional Advisory Forum member 2022

Adaptability

Our framework is designed with adaptability in mind. It is scalable to the size and nature of the project and is adaptable to respond to particular circumstances.

As the pandemic took hold in our region in 2020, we adapted our approach to engage more online, which increased participation from more remote parts of our region. And, in 2021, we sought advice from regional community service organisations about appropriately engaging vulnerable customers during that stage of the pandemic. Guided by them, we delayed this engagement due to the pronounced impact of COVID-19 restrictions on this group.

Our framework also allows for adaptability in key projects, particularly in responding to reputation risks or unexpected incidents.

For example, following an incident in November 2017 in which tiny plastic pellets, known as 'nurdles', were illegally dumped in our Warrnambool Sewage Treatment Plant and subsequently expelled into the ocean, our engagement commitment and framework guided the design of remedial engagements with the local community. We then engaged stakeholders and community members in 2018 to understand their

expectations around sewage screening performance, with their feedback helping us design a strategy for improving the outlet screening of the plant.

Another example of adaptable use of our engagement approach was how we responded to residents of our Darlington community, a small township an hour north-east of Warrnambool.

While we were not planning to make changes to this supply at the time, the community association wrote to us in 2022 raising concerns relating to their non-potable water supply.

We used our engagement framework to plan this engagement and attended an association meeting one evening to understand the concerns of the community, inform them about the constraints on this supply and, with their help, map out some possible options to explore.

As a result, we conducted a Darlington Water Supply Investigation and then returned to another association meeting to share the results and seek any remaining feedback or concerns.

Ultimately, it was agreed with the association that no changes be made to the supply. This engagement gave us the opportunity to build relationships with the community and enhance their understanding and involvement in their water supply.

Concluding remarks

Our maturity in customer and community engagement since 2017 has been transformative. Importantly, it has been driven by a commitment to best practice, including the IAP2 Core Values, from the most senior levels of the organisation.

By developing our own definition of engagement and a practical Community Engagement Framework, we have embedded a proactive, genuine approach to understanding our customers' needs and expectations, and using those insights to make better decisions for our business, our customers and the communities of South West Victoria.

We have upskilled our project managers in engagement design and facilitation, and established a consistent, inclusive annual program of engagement to ensure our customers and communities are involved in the decisions we make that affect them.

'Wannon Water has designed and delivered a robust and thorough engagement program and achieved strong customer and stakeholder influence on the proposals in its submission.'

ESC 2023 Water Price Review (Wannon Water Draft Decision)

From 2018 to 2022, this engagement program captured more than 7,700 instances of customer engagement, providing insightful feedback from across different stakeholder groups and locations. The program has been recognised positively by our customers, stakeholders and regulators and was instrumental in developing our customer-focused 2023-28 Price Submission. The submission received the highest possible rating ('Leading') by the ESC for customer and community engagement.

Our engagement with customers and community is deeply embedded in shaping and achieving strategic and practical outcomes for our business.