



Our Water, Our Voice Customer Engagement

The second phase of the customer engagement program included conversations with over 2,000 residential customers (both homeowners and renters) and over 40 business and government stakeholders between November 2022 and January 2023.

We started a customer engagement program in July 2022, with our customers, community and stakeholders called Our Water, Our Voice. This research will help inform our decision making, Operating Licence and pricing proposal to the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) which will be submitted in September 2024. Here are the results of Phase 2.

What is a price review?

SYDNEY WATER

A price review is part of Sydney Water's cyclical regulatory requirement to IPART. Every five years we develop a price proposal for submission that reflects the efficient cost of providing our services. The priorities and expectations of our customers and community are at the foundation of our price proposal through customer engagement.

IPART

IPART sets the framework for the price review and makes a pricing determination every five years for the maximum price for drinking water and wastewater services that Sydney Water provides. IPART's final decision reflects the efficient cost of providing our services with the priorities and expectations of our customers and community at the foundation.

CUSTOMERS AND COMMUNITY

As end users of our services – including drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater – our customers and the community engage with us to ensure their priorities and expectations are reflected in the price proposal. This means we're all on the same page.

What was Phase 2 about?

Phase 2 of 'Our Water Our Voice' aimed to explore and validate customer expectations for service levels related to Sydney Water's communication, water continuity and outages, water pressure and wastewater overflows. This included determining whether customers would like an increase, decrease, or no change in minimum service standard levels that Sydney Water must meet under its Operating Licence and Customer Contract.

Phase 2, what we did

During Phase 2 we heard from 2,031 customers, community members and stakeholders via forums, focus groups, interviews and online surveys.



5

Forums



14

Focus Groups



34

Interviews



1,521

Online survey responses

Research objectives for Phase 2

- To capture customer expectations and preferences regarding service level areas.
- To assess the willingness of customers to accept an increase, decrease, or no change in the minimum service standard level.
- To obtain insights to aid the design of performance metrics that can help guide the evaluation of Sydney Water's service delivery.

WHAT YOU SAID

"IT WAS GOOD TO HAVE HIGH LEVEL EXECUTIVES ON SITE. SHOWS THAT SYDNEY WATER IS DETERMINED TO SHOW THEY TAKE OUR FEEDBACK SERIOUSLY AND WANT TO HEAR WHAT THE PUBLIC SAY."

"GREAT OPPORTUNITY TO HEAR OTHER PEOPLE'S CONCERNS."

"INTERESTING SESSION. I WILL DEFINITELY BE MORE ENGAGED WITH SYDNEY WATER."

- Participants of forums Phase 2

Customer led themes

Participants in each of the five forums were presented with the 15 customer recommended outcomes that were identified as priorities for Sydney Water as part of Phase 1. They were tasked with grouping and naming these priorities into theme areas to help inform the regulatory process. During this phase the 15 priorities from phase 1 were grouped into four theme areas for Sydney Water.

The four key themes were:



Customer experience



Quality



Environmental protection



Water conservation

Our Water, Our Voice customer engagement preferences

It's important for Sydney Water to know if you want to be kept informed and involved in future discussions about the regulatory process.

Approximately 60% of customers who participated in the forums were interested in being involved in the process in the future:

"YES, I'M INTERESTED IN HOW CUSTOMERS FEEDBACK AND INTERESTS ARE TAKEN INTO CONSIDERATION OF THESE FUTURE PLANS."

"YES, I WOULD BE CURIOUS E.G., SYDNEY WATERS "TOP 3" SUBMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS."

"YES, THE SUBMISSION TO IPART SHOULD BE MADE PUBLICLY AVAILABLE."

"NOT DURING THE PROCESS; PROBABLY JUST THE RESULT."

- Participants of forums Phase 2

What you told us about these priorities:



Customer experience

Talking to us on the phone is still your preferred way to contact us, with 64% of you reporting that you've contacted us by phone. Online and self-service are also important, with 27% of you who contacted Sydney Water doing so through an online enquiry and 23% doing so via email. Online chat was used by 12%, and 9% interacted with Sydney Water via social media.

You prefer human interactions when dealing with Sydney Water with personalised attention, and value the ability to ask questions and to feel valued and heard.

We heard that different situations will impact which method you might choose to contact us – phone being for urgent water leaks and outages and email or online for bill enquiries.

Water Pressure

- Only a small number of you had first-hand experience of water pressure issues in Greater Sydney
- Given that low water pressure incidents are rare, most of you found it difficult to imagine it happening and lacked the knowledge and experience to set realistic standards around the frequency of these incidents for Sydney Water to abide by.
- Sydney Water's current water pressure standards exceed many of your expectations, although this is likely to reflect a lack of knowledge and experience with water pressure issues, rather than a high tolerance for them.
- Most of you said you would trust the experts to make a judgement call on what is fair and reasonable with regards to a water pressure standard for Sydney Water to strive for.
- Sydney Water could consider routinely surveying customers who have experienced water pressure issues and asking them what standard they feel is fair, as these customers are better placed to provide an answer.



Sydney Water's Customer and Community Reference Group (CCRG) provides a platform for independent guidance through the customer engagement process. Ensuring customers and stakeholders are at the heart of Our water, Our voice.

Wastewater Overflows:

- You view wastewater overflows negatively because of the impact they can have on the community, which includes personal inconvenience, damage to the environment, unpleasant odour, and risk to public health.
- You'd like Sydney Water to minimise the severity and frequency of wastewater overflows as much as possible.
- Given that wastewater overflows on properties are rare events, most of you found it difficult to imagine what it is like and, as a result found it hard to set realistic standards for Sydney Water for the frequency of these incidents in this phase.
- Sydney Water's current wastewater overflow standards exceed many of your expectations, although this is likely to reflect a lack of having it happen to you and limited experience with these incidents, rather than a high tolerance for them.
- Many of you indicated that you would rather defer such decisions to the experts and trust Sydney Water to make a judgement call on what is fair and reasonable about wastewater overflow standards.

Drinking water outages

- You want planned and unplanned outages to your water supply to last no more than six hours.
- Planned outages should avoid morning peak 'getting ready' or evening 'winding down' times.
- You support taking more time to make repairs if it avoids future issues or disruptions – "fix it the first time".
- If an outage is unplanned you want us to tell you what is happening so that you are aware there is an issue, that we are working on it and give an estimated time that water will be restored. The majority of people supported being notified by SMS for this purpose, and again when the outage is resolved.
- Some customers we talked to had been impacted by recent large-scale, multi-day events, while others had not experienced any outage in 20 years.
- There is a general level of acceptance that some unplanned outages will occur in a network as big as ours. Just over half of you could tolerate 1-2 unplanned outages per year. But 7% of people thought there should be no outages and 15% weren't sure what would be acceptable.





Our research had depth and breadth across the general population. We spoke to all customer groups including major developers, business customers and value makers and the financially vulnerable. Here are additional outcomes identified by hard-to-reach customers:

Priorities for First Nation's customers:

- Resolution of issues was extremely important for First Nations Australians. It was not sufficient to simply have a complaint or query noted.
- Several First Nations Australians noted the importance of having more First Nations people working at Sydney Water.
- Inclusion of local pharmacies and shopping outlets were suggested as good locations for planned outage posters or notices as these were common community interaction locations, which would be particularly important for older community members who tend to rely on word of mouth.

Priorities for Small and Medium Sized Enterprise customers (SMEs):

- For business, 'time is money' (lost trading time equals lost revenue), and, therefore, outages affected businesses financially. Lost trading time due to outages could also negatively impact on a businesses' reputation (e.g., long-standing customer appointments need to be scheduled at short notice).

Priorities for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD customers):

- All language groups agreed that the most convenient time of day for repairs to take place is overnight.
- On average, Arabic, Vietnamese, Mandarin, and Korean customers needed 3 days to 1 week notification about planned outages, while Greek and Cantonese customers needed, on average, at least 3 weeks.
- Arabic, Greek and Korean communities accepted a max of around 10% unplanned outages per year, while the Cantonese, Mandarin, and Vietnamese communities accepted around 1% to 5% experiencing unplanned interruptions.

Priorities for Individuals Living with a Disability (ILWD):

- Most customers living with a disability believed that the best time for repairs was during standard business hours, as there would likely be less people at home. They identified mid-morning to early afternoon as the best window for this.

Stakeholder specific expectations:

New development serviceability

- Major developers and government representatives said it was important that Sydney Water stick to the estimated time frames provided for new development areas.
- There are negative commercial and reputational impacts that have knock-on effects to residential consumers.
- The biggest challenge for major developers was the length of time for approvals through Sydney Water. They would like Sydney Water to show a greater willingness to listen to alternative ways of doing things. They also find completing the approval process challenging with the technical interface being a notable barrier.

Conduits for community involvement

- Major developers and government representatives are frequently the conduit for notifying the community when there is an outage either through website community pages, social media, or direct contact from the public.
- They felt that better communication from Sydney Water was needed, and that more assistance should be offered around outage communication and ancillary services such as traffic management, signage, associated council repairs.



Next steps

The customer expectations for service levels identified by this research will shape the direction of Sydney Water's proposal to the regulator. These expectations will be further explored and refined in the remaining phases of the 'Our Water, Our Voice' engagement program:

- In Phase 3, customers will be presented with a range of options understand their preferred combination of service and investment areas.
- In Phase 4, customer willingness to pay for service level improvements and investment areas will be tested.

Sydney Water thanks the participants of Phase 2. It's been great. If you wish to stay informed register to get involved in upcoming engagement activities visit:
www.sydneywater.com.au/our-water-our-voice

