

Hall & Partners

Essential Water Customer Panel



Meeting 1 Report

December 2024



Background

Essential Water is the water and sewerage services provider for the Broken Hill, Menindee, Silverton and Sunset Strip areas of NSW and supplies services to 18,000 customers including a mix of residents and businesses. It is an operating division of Essential Energy, a NSW Government State Owned Corporation.

Similar to its parent company, Essential Water is required to develop a Pricing Proposal every five years which provides details of its upcoming expenditure and revenue requirements. The business is now commencing the development of the next Pricing Proposal and has set up a new customer panel, the Essential Water Customer Panel (EWCP), as a mechanism for engaging with relevant customers.

Throughout the next year, the business will conduct in-depth engagement with this group on customer priorities, initiatives and pricing. This will complement broader online engagement with all Essential Water customers and more targeted engagement with larger customers and other stakeholders that will be run concurrently by the business.

The EWCP will meet in-person at a venue in Broken Hill, several times between November 2024 and September 2025.

This report outlines the findings and implications of the first meeting of the EWCP conducted in November 2024.



Objectives

The objectives of the **first session** were to:

- 1** Establish the EWCP and communicate Essential Water expectations of EWCP members and member expectations of Essential Water
- 2** Achieve EWCP member understanding of Essential Water operations, costs and the pricing proposal process
- 3** Identify ranked customers' priorities (principles and outcomes) for Essential Water to incorporate into the Pricing Proposal and IWCM





RECRUITMENT

Customers were invited by the business to submit an expression of interest (EOI) to be part of the EWCP.

Selection to the Panel was open to anyone who is a customer of Essential Water.

Essential Water collected demographic information from those who provided an EOI.

SAMPLING

Final selection to take part was based on obtaining a mix of demographics in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, business ownership, income and vulnerability.

Eighteen people ended up being selected to be part of the panel, with sixteen participants attending on the day – their demographics are shown below.

METHODOLOGY

A 2.5-hour meeting was conducted in Broken Hill Demo Club on Monday 25 November from 6.00–8.30pm.

The format of the meeting consisted of a mix of information provision from Essential Water, Q&As, table discussions and activities and table feedback sessions.

Gender	Male	9
	Female	7
First Nations	Yes	5
Small business	Yes	5
Difficulty paying bills	Yes	5

Date of Birth	
1945-54	2
1955-64	2
1965-74	4
1975-84	6
1984-94	0
1995-2005	1
Prefer not to say	1

Income	
Less than \$45,000	5
\$45,000-\$80,000	3
\$80,001-\$120,000	2
\$120,001-\$150,000	1
\$150,001 and above	2
Prefer not to say	3

Meeting structure and agenda

The sixteen panel members were seated on two round tables of eight people each. Each table had a facilitator from Hall and Partners (Liz Sparham and Zoe Brown).

The table facilitators guided participants through the discussions, asked questions on the topics and kept the tables to time. An overview of the agenda is included on the right with a full run sheet included in the Appendix).

Essential Water staff members gave presentations on the background to the project, the role of Essential Water, the services it provides, and pricing information. They were on hand to answer any questions from panel members and to provide any additional information required.

Overall, the participants were highly engaged and interested in the topics presented, with discussions being robust and full. An evaluation was conducted at the close of the session with participants completing an end of session survey – results are included in the Appendix.

Time	Agenda Item
6.00pm	Welcome and Introduction
6.10pm	Table Discussion: Introductions and current experiences
6.20pm	Presentation: Essential Water's role and services
6.30pm	Table Activity: Long-term vision
6.55pm	Light Dinner
7.10pm	Table Activity: Customer priorities for the next 5 years
7.45pm	Dessert Break
7.55pm	Ranking the priorities exercise
8.00pm	Table Discussion: Challenges facing Essential Water
8.20pm	Summing up and next steps
8.30pm	Close

Key takeaways

1

Participants were highly engaged and enjoyed taking part in the session. Feedback after the session showed that these kinds of meetings were thought to be a good way of consulting the public about issues.

2

Customers are happy with the service being provided by Essential Water currently. Since the introduction of the Murray River to Broken Hill pipeline, water quality and security has improved significantly.

3

Customers have a strong vision for the future of the area – water conservation was prominent as well as the use of new technology to ensure an adequate high quality water supply. They also pictured a sustainable green environment, using water storage areas for recreation and healthy waterways.

4

The two main priorities for the shorter term were thought to be maintaining water quality and ensuring water security.

Other important themes were improving the health of the waterways by managing environmental flows and the aquatic ecosystem.

5

Working collaboratively with other government agencies and departments such as the Murray Darling Basin Authority, WaterNSW and the NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) was deemed important to ensure delivery of customers' priorities for the future.





01

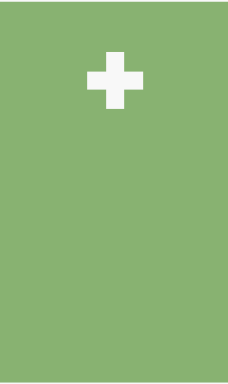
Current Experience

What Essential Water is doing well

At the start of the session, following an introduction from Essential Water on the background to the project and its role and services provided, participants were asked what they think Essential Water is doing well and not so well currently, based on their own experiences and/or what they have heard in the community.

Generally, participants were quite positive about the services provided by Essential Water. In particular, both tables mentioned that the water supply had improved significantly since the introduction of the Murray River to Broken Hill pipeline in 2019.

The main themes for what participants thought Essential Water is doing well are included in the table below.

	
	Water quality has improved greatly – smell and taste
	Better water supply and water security – ‘the water is always on’
	Essential Water are responsive and fix the issue quickly if there is a water leak
	Prices were thought to be quite reasonable, particularly for such a remote location



“The pipeline that was brought in has improved the water supply. Quality of water has improved immensely. Everyone used to buy bottled water because the quality was so bad.”

“The taste of the water has also improved. It doesn’t taste like dirt now. My skin doesn’t get as dry and itchy as it used to. My scalp used to itch like I had nits and my hair felt like straw.”

“The prices to pay are pretty reasonable considering the location. Pretty good here.”

What improvements could be made

There were more varied themes for the things that participants thought Essential Water could improve upon and they were often mentioned by just one or two participants. These related to water quality, pressure, customer service and roles/responsibilities.

The main themes are included in the table below.

	Variations in water pressure – it was reported that water pressure can be a bit high in the morning in Broken Hill and too low in Menindee.
	The fish kills in Menindee in 2018/19 and again in 2022 – the cause was unknown, but it impacted the quality of the water causing a lot of concern. Due to the uncertainty around the cause, there is concern about whether it will happen again.
	Lack of visibility – it was mentioned that Essential Water don’t have a strong presence in Broken Hill (although some suggested this could be positive).
	They would like more options for customer service – customers have to speak to Essential Water by phone currently whereas some would like a physical location.
	Unclear responsibilities when it comes to issues with pipes – when it is Essential Water’s and when is it the homeowners’ responsibility to fix issues.
	More transparency about what is in the water, e.g. calcium
	Smelly public drains on occasion



“The fish kills, the blue green algae at Menindee. There was a conflicting report about what the issue was, why it was happening. Every house got a filter but there was a lot of concern about the quality of the water.”

“There is only one option for how the bills are delivered. I am on a bill smoothing. You have to speak to them by phone as there’s no office anymore in Broken Hill. Not having a shop front is inconvenient.”

“You don’t hear from Essential Water. I’m not sure that is a good thing or not. They are not here, not visible.”

02

Vision for the Future

Vision for Broken Hill in 25 years' time

Next, following a presentation on how the bill is made up and how the water cycle works, participants were asked to do a visualisation exercise.

The purpose of the exercise was to explore what is most important to customers for the long-term future, in 25 years' time. They were prompted to think about all the uses of water – personal, household, garden, broader community, industry as well as how they interact with Essential Water when determining their vision for the future.

They were asked to create a collage using a set of images and/or drawing and writing about what they wanted to be a part of their future vision for water and wastewater.

The following themes emerged from the discussions and choice of images for the collages:

1. Water was thought to be crucial for the future livability of Broken Hill – having an abundant water supply enhances quality of life and instills a sense of freedom.

2. Notwithstanding, water conservation and using water wisely were suggested as important values for the future – with greater use of water tanks (with filters to take out the contaminants such as lead) and more sustainable gardens that require less water.

3. Both groups were clear that they didn't want strictly enforced or long-term water restrictions so wanted enough water available to be able to live freely.



“There used to be a lot more water restrictions. We don't want water restrictions in 25 years time.”



“I would like to see more rainwater tanks – offer rebates to homeowners to install one.”



“Consideration for sustainable gardens that don't require a lot of water.”

Vision for Broken Hill in 25 years' time cont...

Themes continued...

4. New inventions that ensure there is adequate rainfall.

5. Greater use of recycled water for non-drinking purposes.

6. Using technology to clear contaminants in the water (reduce lead) and provide accurate testing/monitoring.

7. Greener spaces - community gardens and increased vegetation in the streets.

8. Recreation – green sports fields, rivers and lakes being managed so that people can swim/do water sports in them.

9. Natural wetlands and healthy waterways.

10. More efficient ways to interact with Essential Water for billing/meter readings and stable bills.

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“Would be nice to have a public boating area. They used to have one, but I think lots of pollutants get washed into it - coolant, brake fluid.”

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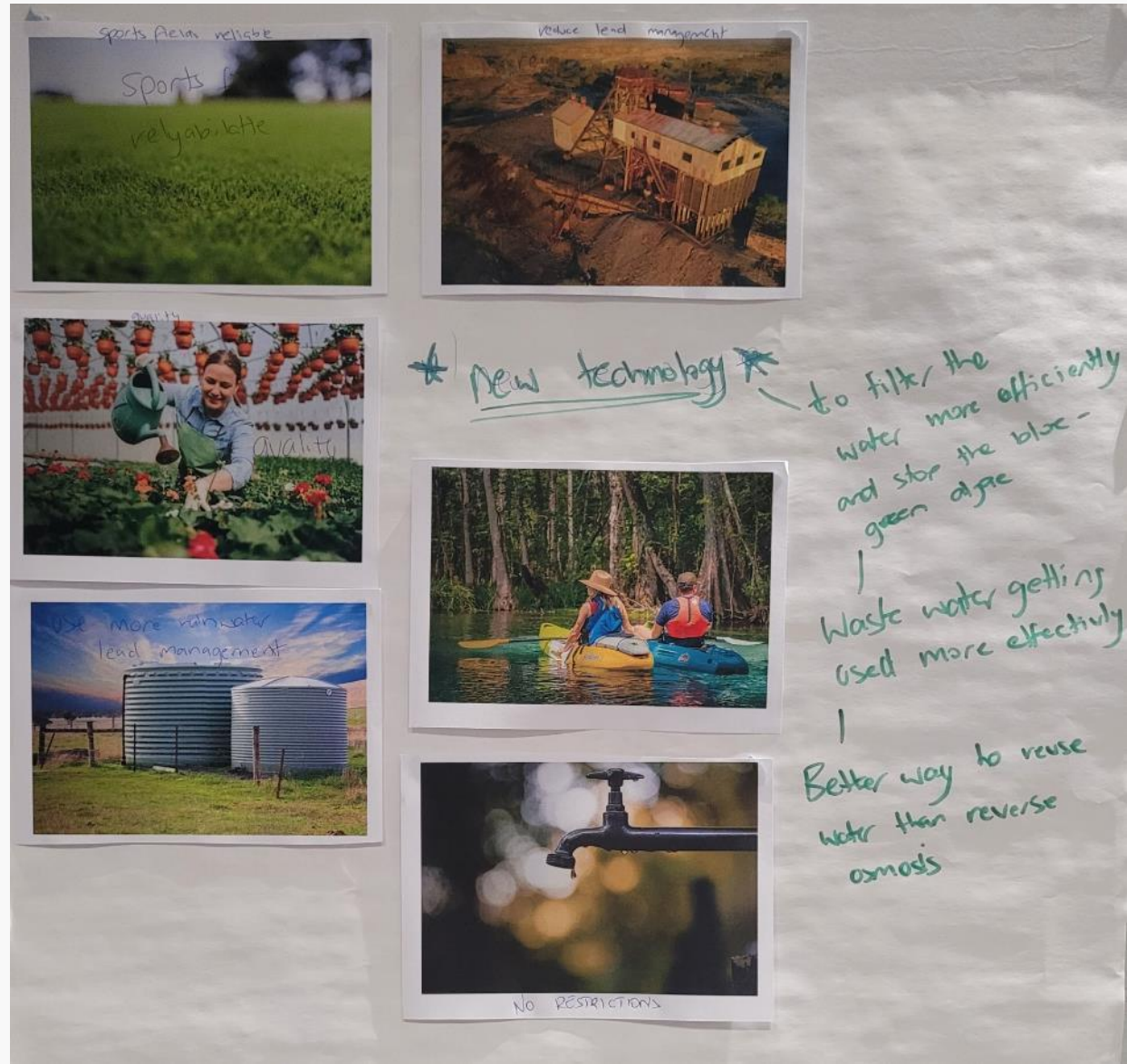
“They keep selling off water licences – we need the water for the environment. Menindee has a high salt level – they use reverse osmosis but it is horrendously expensive. We need a better way of doing it rather than reverse osmosis, that will move the water back up the system so it can come back down. We are stopping the natural flow. Water licences aren't helping.”

“



“Better ways to pay bills and more efficient ways to submit meter readings. Should be able to submit meter readings yourself online.”

Participants' collages



03

Principles and outcomes

Customer priorities – principles and outcomes

The next session was the main focus of the evening. Participants were asked to complete an activity on their tables that involved taking everything they had discussed so far and thinking about what Essential Water should focus on for the next 5 years in the way of outcomes. They were asked to consider water supply, wastewater services and how customers interact with Essential Water. Each outcome or goal was written on a card and then the cards were sorted into categories and the groups chose labels for their categories or ‘principles’. Each table provided feedback to the room on their principles and outcomes. The following is a collated summary of the outcomes and principles generated.

P R I N C I P L E	 Water quality	 Water security	 Sustainability/Managing environmental flows
	This principle was raised repeatedly during the meeting and embodied having clean and safe drinking water. As mentioned, it was thought to have improved since the introduction of the pipeline, although there were still mentions of a strong chlorine taste.	Although the pipeline has significantly increased perceptions of water security, there was still the concern that this will not provide long term security as its lifespan was thought to be 25 years. Therefore, participants wanted Essential Water to plan now for longer term water security.	This principle encapsulated multiple components such as ensuring environmental flows, a healthy river ecosystem and green energy. There was mention that vegetation removal in the waterways has led to a decrease in natural filtration.
O U T C O M E S	• Water that is fit for purpose (e.g. drinking, showering and washing clothes). • Regular water testing and transparent reporting on water quality. • Minimal contaminants such as lead in the water.	• Ensuring there is water security in the longer term even if the population grows. • Ensuring there is enough water even in drought conditions (i.e. having a plan B).	• Protection of the aquatic ecosystem • Effective management of environmental flows so there is not constant fluctuation of water levels (and rising salt). • Using renewable power for infrastructure such as treatment plants • Regeneration/opening up of waterways for recreation

Customer priorities – principles and outcomes cont...

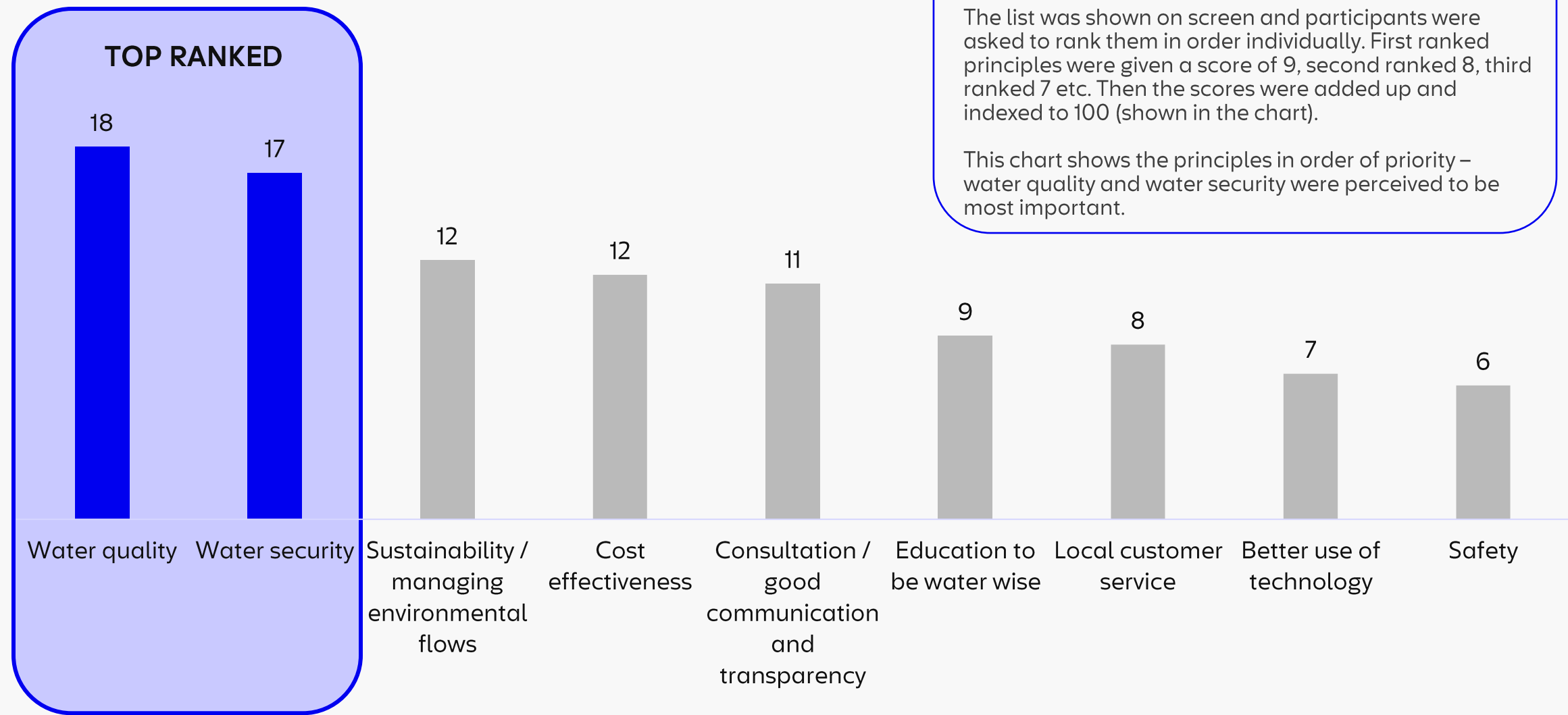
	 Cost effectiveness	 Consultation/ good communication/ transparency	 Education to be water wise
PRINCIPLE	Particularly in the current climate of cost-of-living pressures, having a business that is run cost efficiently, with bills that are affordable to customers, was deemed important.	Participants valued Essential Water providing more information in a transparent way. They also put forward the suggestion of further consultation with the community to involve them in decisions that impact them. One of the topics they wanted more information on was the decision about where to pump water from to ensure water security for Broken Hill, e.g. at one stage an option was the bottom of Lake Frome but it was dismissed – why?	Water conservation was a topic mentioned on both tables as it was felt to be important to encourage water efficient behaviours amongst the community.
OUTCOMES	• Transparent breakdown of costs and spending from Essential Water. • Lower bills. • Stable bills without cost spikes.	• A better-informed community through transparency in information provision. • Increased face-to-face community consultation for decisions that impact them • Specific consultation with the Indigenous community.	• Educating children and young people about water issues including water conservation. • Communications about being more ‘water wise’ in the town centre, e.g. water conservation signage. • Development of water efficient public and private buildings, including redevelopment of existing buildings, community gardens. • Educating the community on having a water efficient garden, e.g. which plants to grow, installing efficient watering systems.

Customer priorities – principles and outcomes

cont...

P R I N C I P L E	 Local customer service	 Better use of technology	 Safety
	Participants mentioned that it is harder to deal with Essential Water without a local office. Calling a general helpline meant that they didn't get the benefit of that local knowledge that staff at an office in Broken Hill would provide. The local knowledge leads to confidence and trust. They also mentioned that it provides local employment opportunities so contributes to the local economy.	Participants valued Essential Water using new technology to provide a better customer experience and more efficient service, for example, the ability to upload meter readings or provide automatic meter readings.	Safety was raised as a topic by one table. This included safety of the workforce and the public.
O U T C O M E S	• Easy access to a local service department.	• Being able to upload meter readings rather than use estimates or automated meter readings.	• Ensuring safety of workforce and the public

Ranking the principles



Once the tables had provided feedback to the room on their principles and outcomes, a summary list of principles was collated.

The list was shown on screen and participants were asked to rank them in order individually. First ranked principles were given a score of 9, second ranked 8, third ranked 7 etc. Then the scores were added up and indexed to 100 (shown in the chart).

This chart shows the principles in order of priority – water quality and water security were perceived to be most important.

04

Influence of challenges

The challenges

Essential Water provided some of the challenges it is facing currently to see if any of these factors influenced the priorities put forward by participants:

Cost of living pressures for our customers

Remote location

Stable population

Low customer density (low customer numbers)

Ageing infrastructure

Increasing project costs

Ageing workforce

Climate change impacts

Lead and dust impacts

All of the challenges put forward were known to the panel members prior to the meeting and most were thought to be not particularly unique to Essential Water.

They actually felt that some were not really challenges as such, e.g the increasing project costs would just be charged to customers over a long timespan of 20 years or so.

Overall, the tables felt that they had discussed most of these factors during the sessions, so did not feel that they impacted much on the priorities they had raised.

The only additional priority that was raised during this discussion was 'collaborative working'. It was thought to be important that Essential Water works with other government agencies and departments such as the Murray Darling Basin Authority, WaterNSW and the NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) to ensure water security and healthy waterways for Broken Hill and surrounds in the future.

05

Conclusions

Summary and conclusions

The session was lively and engaging with participants making strong contributions throughout. In fact, discussions were so robust that sometimes participants had to be moved along to ensure the objectives of the session were met.

Customers have a strong vision for the long-term future of the area – this includes more household water storage, a greener but sustainable environment, using water for recreation purposes and healthy waterways.

The priorities for the next period fall into seven key themes (in provisional order of importance):

01

**Water quality**

02

**Water security**

03

**Sustainability/ environmental protection**

04

**Cost efficiency**

05

**Customer interaction/ experience**

06

**Communication, engagement and transparency**

07

**Water conservation**

Collaboration with other government departments and agencies was considered important to ensure the above priorities are met.



It is recommended that these priorities be re-tested and ranked at the beginning of the next session in February 2025.

The most important priorities should be explored further in terms of what specific outcomes customers want and what they are willing to pay for during the next period.

06

Appendix

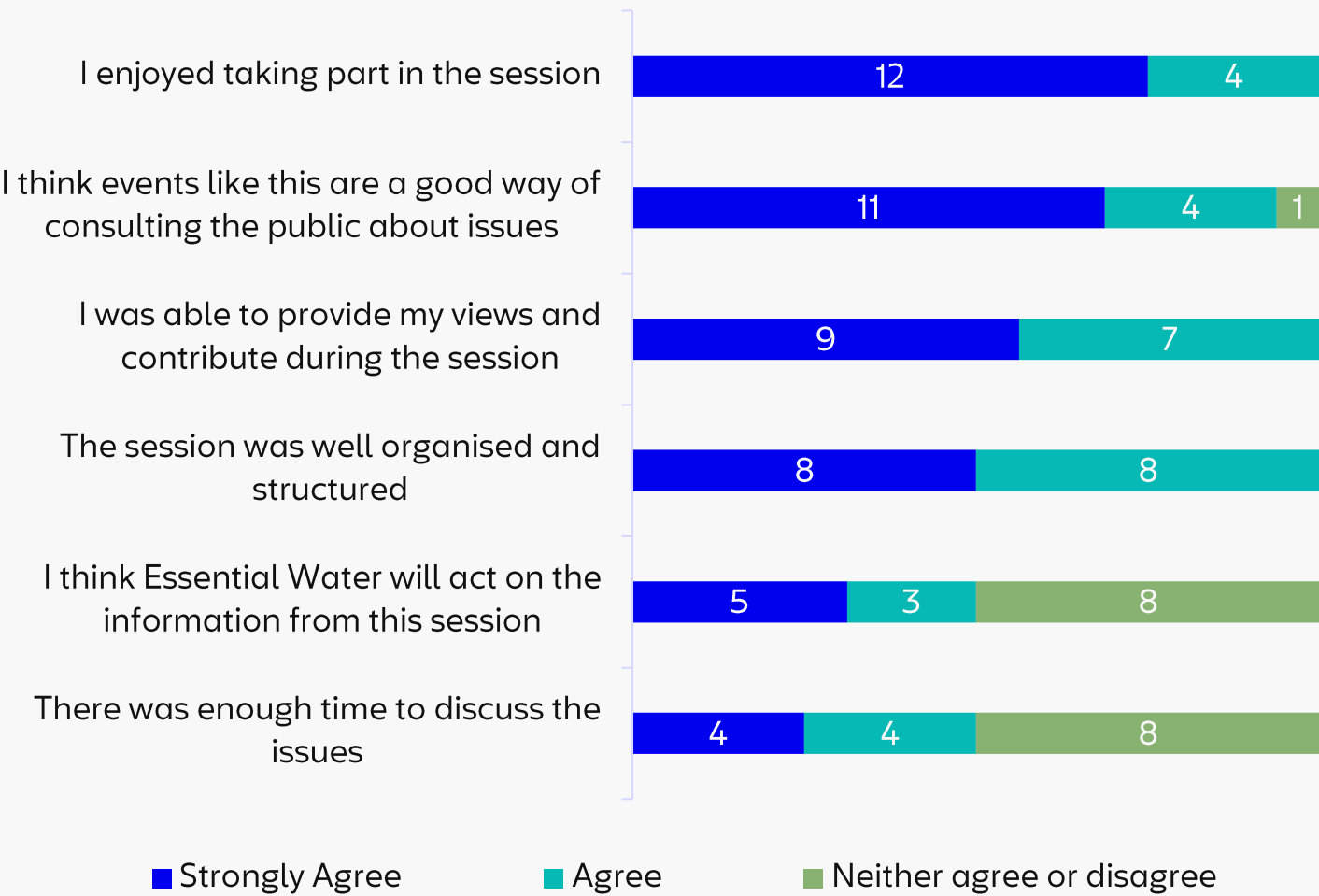
Customer Panel End of Session Feedback

Participants were asked to complete an end of session evaluation of the meeting. Results are shown on the right.

Most participants strongly agreed that they enjoyed taking part in the session and that such events are a good way of consulting the public about issues. A large proportion also strongly agreed that they were able to provide their views and contribute during the session as well as that the session was well organised and structured.

Half agreed that Essential Water will act on the information from this session and that there was enough time to discuss the issues.

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“It was really welcoming, engaging and interesting.”
“Diversity of group, Range of topics discussed, professional, friendly, organised facilitations.”
“Discussion, variety of people and their ideas.”



Essential Water Customer Panel Run Sheet

Time	Agenda Item	Responsibility	Materials
6.00pm-6.03pm (3 mins)	Facilitator Introduction - Welcome to the session - Introduce H&P as facilitators assisting EW and give a brief outline of structure of the session (i.e. they will be given information and asked to discuss their views on particular issues) - Guidelines - 'Topics to engage on next time' noticeboard - Housekeeping – toilets and emergency protocol - Photo permission forms - Introduce first speaker	H&P	Flipchart with heading 'Topics to engage on next time' plus post it notes
6.03pm-6.13pm (10 mins)	EW Introduction - Acknowledge of Country - Explain what Essential Water does – what services are provided and its role in relation to water supply and wastewater (incl. what water supply and wastewater means) - Why EW needs to do a pricing proposal and ICWM, how the business is engaging with customers and how their feedback will be used (inform them about the whole engagement program) - Explain the background and reason that the EWCP has been set up for these proposals, what the purpose of the Panel is, what EW are hoping for from the group - Outline objectives for this first meeting – to find out their priorities so we can ensure EW is investing in what is important to customers	EW – Ross Berry	PPT

6.13-6.23pm (10 mins)	Table Discussion: Current experiences - <i>Introductions – first name, where live, whether they are a small business owner, small/medium/large water user in household/business.</i> - From your experience, and what you have heard in the community, what do you think the water and wastewater supplier is <u>doing well</u> currently? - From your experience, and what you have heard in the community, what is <u>not working as well</u> currently?	H&P	
6.23pm-6.30pm (7 mins)	EW Presentation – Build knowledge on Essential Water's services, water supply and EW's role <i>So now we are going to give you a bit more detail about what services we provide as part of your bill, how the water cycle works</i> - Explain what makes up a water bill (services provided – water supply and wastewater services) - Water cycle - educate about where water comes from and how it is treated and delivered to customers, how it is taken away and EW's role within that	EW	PPT

Essential Water Customer Panel Run Sheet cont...

6.30pm-6.50pm (20 mins)	Table Discussion: Long-Term Vision <i>We want to find out what is most important to you and how we can help make BH a great place to live now and in the future.</i> <i>During this visualisation exercise I want you to think about all of the uses for water – personal, household, garden, broader community e.g. recreation, industry etc. I also want you to think about customer interaction with EW as well as the services it provides.</i> Long term vision - 25 years' time - How important do you think water is to the liveability of a town? - Besides at the household level, in what ways does water impact the liveability of a town? <i>E.g. Water makes sure that we have...</i> - In what ways does water make BH and surrounds more pleasant, more productive, or more enjoyable to live in? - So thinking far into the future, say 25 years' time – How do you picture BH then? What would make BH a really great place to live in terms of how water is used then? What would you hope for from your water supplier? Think about the interaction with the supplier as well as the services it provides. - <i>Encourage the group to use stimulus images and create a vision on the board. Ask them to explain why they chose the images and what they are hoping for in the future. They can draw if they want to too.</i> - <i>Prompt for how they want water to be used in the future for personal, household, garden, broader community uses, e.g. recreation, industry.</i> - <i>Also prompt for how they want to interact with the water supplier.</i> <i>Ask a spokesperson to present back in the next session (1-2 mins max)</i>	H&P	
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Use images and create a vision for the future board

Blutack

Glue

Can also draw on the board

6.50pm-6.55pm (5 mins)	Tables present their vision for the future	H&P	Flipcharts
6.55pm-7.10pm (15 mins)	Dinner Break		PPT slide
7.10pm-7.40pm (30 mins)	Table discussion: Customer Priorities Short Term 5 years' time (30 mins) - Having discussed what you think is working well and not so well currently from your water supplier, and your thoughts on the long-term future, what do you think Essential Water should focus on for the next 5 years? What goals should it have? - Think about water supply and wastewater and the way that EW provides the service, i.e. how customers interact with EW. What would you value Essential Water doing the most in the next 5 years? CARD SORT: Give out Handout 1 to help with conversation – example from energy. - We'd like you to work as a group to develop a list of what is important to you. We are going to write each thing (goal/outcome) on a card. Then we are going to sort them into categories and create a name for each one (overarching priority). <i>Write name of priority on a post it note and stick to the piles of cards.</i> - <i>Do the exercise for water and wastewater as a whole (i.e. you could have outcomes for water and wastewater under the same overarching priority heading) and also including customer interaction</i> <i>If they come to a halt then give out the personas to help the conversation so they are thinking more broadly than just themselves, e.g. family, small business etc,</i> <i>At the end of the discussion ask a spokesperson to write overarching priorities (i.e. what is on the post its) on a flipchart ready for the next session.</i>		Handout 1 Cards Post its Flipchart Blutack

Essential Water Customer Panel Run Sheet cont...

7.40pm-7.45pm (5 mins)	Tables report back on their priorities for the next 5 years from the flipchart	H&P	Flipcharts
7.45-7.55pm (10 mins)	Quick break – H&P to compile list of priorities to put on screen		
7.55pm-8.00pm (5 mins)	Individual Exercise - Each participant ranks the priorities	H&P	Ranking sheet
8.00-8.15pm (15 mins)	Table discussion: Challenges facing EW Give out handout 2 - Do these challenges facing EW influence your priorities in anyway? <i>Spokesperson to write any changes to the priorities due to challenges on a flipchart</i>	H&P	Handout 2
8.15pm-8.20pm (5 mins)	Tables report back - Any different priorities due to challenges faced by EW?	H&P	Flipcharts
8.20pm-8.30pm	Recap of what we heard and next steps	EW	