

Minutes

Venue: Sydney Water Parramatta Office
Level 5, 2 Parramatta Square, Parramatta NSW

Date and time: 24 February 2025
9:00am – 2:45pm

Meeting title: Customer and Community Reference Group

Attendees

Independent Chair: Abigail Goldberg

CCRG Members:

Anna Bacik – Community Representative
Narelle Brown – Community Representative
Joy Horton – Community Representative
Mary Karras – Ethnic Communities Council NSW
Bruce McClelland – Business Western Sydney
Stephen McMahon – Urban Development Institute of Australia (*part*)
Donna Rogers – Community Industry Group (Illawarra)
Graham Turner – Council on the Ageing
Ross Williams – Local Government NSW

Sydney Water:

Stuart Wallace – General Manager, Customer & Stakeholder Engagement
Josh Isben – Head of Customer & Strategic Insights
Izzy Kerr – Customer Research Manager
Rachelle Legrand – Head of Strategy, Change & Performance
Daniel Peacock – Head of Customer Contact (*part*)
Arli Miller – Head of Government, Stakeholder & Community Engagement
Sharon Bowyer – Senior Customer Governance Specialist

Guest:

Lucy Cole Edelstein – Director, Kadima (*part*)

Apologies/absent:

Roch Cheroux – Managing Director
Leigh Martin – Total Environment Centre
Douglas McCloskey – Justice and Equity Centre
Mario Ferreira Compart – Community Representative

Meeting purpose:

Bi-monthly meeting according to CCRG Charter

The CCRG works with Sydney Water at a strategic level to achieve the highest possible levels of customer focus within our practices. It supports Sydney Water to ensure that our business decisions, as set out in our strategy, enterprise plan and regulatory submissions, are in the best interests of all Sydney Water customers and the community and are shaped by them.

Desired outcome:

Discussion and feedback from CCRG Members

Agenda items

Item	Topic	Actions
1	Welcome and Acknowledgement of Country The meeting opened at 9:10am and the Chair welcomed participants. Stuart Wallace acknowledged Country and paid respects to elders past and present.	
2	Introductions and apologies The Chair introduced new CCRG member, Joy Horton, a community representative. Joy has in addition extensive experience with matters of policy as well as First Nations and community engagement in general. She is currently providing advice to Sydney Water associated with Purified Recycled Water community engagement. Apologies were noted, including from the Sydney Water Managing Director.	
3	Housekeeping Sydney Water advised of the evacuation requirements and administrative aspects for the venue.	

	The Chair confirmed the ground rules for the CCRG meeting which focus on respect, tolerance and ensuring equity in discussions for all participants.	
4	<p>Minutes of previous meeting and review of actions / issues log</p> <p>Declaration of interests</p> <p>The Minutes and action/issues log of the 11 November 2024 CCRG meeting, which had been transmitted inter-session, were discussed. Minutes and action register to be revised to include broader community engagement topics on the CCRG Forward Plan.</p> <p>As mentioned during the introductions, it was formally declared that new CCRG member Joy Horton is currently a supplier to Sydney Water providing specialised community engagement support on one specific project.</p> <p>No additional interests were declared.</p>	<p>Sydney Water to revise minutes and action register to include broader community engagement topics on CCRG Forward Plan.</p> <p>Joy Horton's declaration to be recorded.</p>
	Sydney Water and CCRG member updates	
5	<p>CCRG Member and Independent Chair update</p> <p>Representatives from Business Western Sydney visited Sydney Water's Purified Recycled Water demonstration plant in November 2024. The visit was regarded as worthwhile and appreciated.</p> <p>The Chair confirmed that she had prepared the CCRG Annual Report for 2024, which synthesises the record of activities for the year. No comments had been received on the draft version as circulated and accordingly the report was taken as accepted.</p> <p>The Chair advised that she had met with IPART at their request regarding the approach of the CCRG and submission provided.</p>	
6	<p>General Manager update</p> <p>Stuart Wallace provided an update on the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The issue of mosquito breeding in the settlement pond of the Liverpool Water Resource Recovery facility has been resolved. The issue was managed through a program of weed removal from the ponds and spraying mosquito larvae. Sydney Water had worked closely with NSW Health, the EPA, council and local community in this regard. A new treatment system to remove PFAS has been operating at the Cascade Water Filtration Plant (Blue Mountains) since January 2025. While the Cascade plant produces safe drinking water in line with current Australian Drinking Water Guidelines, the new treatment system removes PFAS to negligible levels. Sample results indicate that PFAS levels for treated water in the Cascade drinking water system have already been reduced to levels below the proposed new guideline limits. Sydney Water will factor in this newer technology into future upgrades. Full testing results (beyond what the Drinking Water Quality Guidelines requires) are to be published publicly with a view to promoting transparency and facilitating trust with the local community in particular. Sydney Water will also continue to work with the Blue Mountains community to provide information on the new treatment process. A community open day is also planned. Sydney Water has participated in two Senate enquiries into PFAS. Sydney Water has launched "Water is our Life", a new campaign featuring Olympic champion, Jess Fox. The new campaign celebrates the people, processes and innovation behind delivering safe, clean water to the 5.4 million residents of Greater Sydney. 	

	<p>Key questions and suggestions from the CCRG included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was the new treatment process being used? • What was the specific source of PFAS in the Blue Mountains? • Is there residual PFAS in the water after treatment in the new system? • Has there been any evidence of increased bottled water sales due to concerns in drinking water (this aligns to levels of trust and willingness to pay for drinking water)? • It is important to engage with secondary schools in the Blue Mountains, both public and private schools, to inform and educate the next generation on water treatment. <p>Sydney Water explained that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The new treatment system uses activated carbon and ion exchange process. • The likely source of PFAS was firefighting foam used in response to a major tanker spill back in 1992. However, Water NSW are doing their own investigations with a report due mid-year. • The new process reduces PFAS to negligible levels, which Sydney Water will confirm. • There have been no reports of increased bottled water sales but increased marketing from water filter companies has been apparent. • Other elements being tested were still under the PFAS umbrella. • The suggestion of a secondary school education program regarding water quality in the Blue Mountains was welcomed. 	<p>Sydney Water to confirm if PFAS is reduced to negligible levels after the new treatment process.</p> <p>Sydney Water to ask contacts at Woolworths if there has been any increase in bottled water sales</p> <p>Sydney Water to consider building education program on water quality particularly for secondary schools in the Blue Mountains.</p>
	Price Proposal	
7	<p>2025-2030 Price Proposal update</p> <p>Stuart Wallace provided an update on the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IPART have delayed their determination of the Sydney Water Price Proposal. The draft determination is now due in May 2025, final report due in Sept 2025 and new prices to commence from 1 Oct 2025. • 320 public submissions were received by IPART on Sydney Water's Price Proposal. 75% considered negative and approximately 10% considered positive submissions. • Meeting with IPART this week to discuss Sydney Water's approach to and outcomes from the customer engagement supporting its Price Proposal. • Sydney Water were in discussion with Government on potential new financial support for low-income households. <p>Key questions from the CCRG included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What communication has been provided to staff on the proposed price increase? <p>Sydney Water advised that lunch and learn sessions and an MD video had been provided for staff to explain the Price Proposal. Generally, staff appear to understand the need for the investment program but are mindful of the cost for customers and the need to weigh up the risk and costs associated with keeping current networks working while also delivering for growth. There is also a recognised need to respond to climate change to provide new supplies for water (rainfall independent).</p>	
8	<p>Paper for discussion: Building on Sydney Water's payment assistance program</p> <p>Josh Isben and Daniel Peacock provided an update on Sydney Water's Payment Assistance Program and future potential options. Key points included:</p>	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customers experiencing or at risk of falling into financial distress are anticipated to continue to increase as a result of cost-of-living pressures, housing affordability challenges and proposed increases to water prices. • Sydney Water is scaling up and optimising its Customer Care team and reviewing its current financial support options to ensure they are adequate to meet customer financial support requirements in the coming years. • Sydney Water is considering new options, including introducing a Low-Income Water Rebate, which would provide ongoing proactive bill support to customers on low incomes, who don't qualify for the current Pensioner Concession. • Sydney Water presented the options and a series of guiding principles that are proposed for assessing options. • CCRG feedback on the options was sought, as well as any other ideas from members that Sydney Water could explore to build on the existing payment support offerings. • While Sydney Water is identifying and analysing options to improve financial support for customers, it was noted that the programs are funded through Government policy and any change to the programs is a Government decision. • Sydney Water is communicating to Government that they are consulting the CCRG in this process. <p>Comments and points of discussion from the CCRG included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The various options proposed by Sydney Water appear to be redistributing benefits from one group to another ("robbing Peter to pay Paul") and shifting the burden. If pensioner concessions are not increased in line with bill increases there will be more complaints. • An alternative view was that homeowners that are on pensions are likely to be more well-off and so the amount of concession could be a traded off in order to support others on low income. • More information was requested on concessions for Exempt Properties and the Blue Mountains septic pump-out subsidy, including how long will this go on for. • How would Sydney Water monitor any low-income rebate and would it help them save water? • It was noted that Option 2, 3 and 4 do not align with the third principle for assessing options. • Cost of living impacts all people, not just those on low income. What other options are being considered such as reduction in late payment and credit card payment fees? • How are those living in apartments being considered? Costs for individual water usage goes up but so does strata fees for common water. • It is not obvious on the Sydney Water bill how customers can seek payment assistance. • Was there an issue with the Tenancy act for what can be charged to tenants? • An additional follow up session with the CCRG on this topic was requested. <p>Sydney Water advised that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Currently Sydney Water can only directly bill property owners (as set out by legislation). Any outstanding debt on the customer bill can be recovered when the property is sold. • Landlords can recover the water usage cost from tenants where a water meter is in place. Tenants are able to get support on water usage if they meet certain criteria. 	<p>Arrange follow up session with CCRG members on this topic. Provide more information on concessions for</p>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> About \$80,000 a year is written off from business customers accounts (usually due to business being liquidated). Approx \$16M a year is applied through other customer account adjustments e.g. removal of late payment charges, concealed leak concessions. A project is underway to look at redesigning the Sydney Water bill to better communicate matters such as how to access help when needed, and it would be useful to get CCRG input into this. An additional session will be arranged to discuss this topic further with the CCRG. 	<p>exempt properties and Blue Mountains</p> <p>Include Sydney Water bill redesign project for discussion on CCRG Forward Plan.</p>
	Governance	
9	<p>Paper for discussion: CCRG Charter - Annual Review</p> <p>Administrative changes to the CCRG Charter were accepted. Additional comments were provided by members.</p>	Update CCRG Charter and recirculate.
	Customer and community engagement	
10	<p>Paper for discussion: Strategic customer engagement update</p> <p>Josh Isben advised on amendments to Sydney Water's strategic customer engagement plan following discussions with the Executive.</p> <p>Additional comments on the proposed customer engagement principles were provided by members.</p>	Update strategic customer engagement principles and recirculate.
11	<p>Best practice customer engagement - Information and training session</p> <p>Josh Isben outlined the background to this session and the purpose. Lucy Cole-Edelstein was introduced.</p> <p>The session covered key aspects including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Customer engagement and Sydney Water, the fundamentals of customer engagement, the IAP2 spectrum and core values. What is best practice customer engagement? How can the CCRG know? Are deliberative engagement processes best practice? When should they be used? <p>The session explored:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deliberative engagement is predicated on the belief that ordinary people, when given the time and access to information, will reach sensible decisions for the greater good, on behalf of the wider community. The key elements of deliberative engagement included random selection, access to a wide range of information, time to consider and reach a conclusion and making decisions as a group. The pitfalls of deliberative engagement, including barriers to participation for some sectors of the community. It needs to be considered whether every demographic group can and should be represented in the same room at the same time. Engagement sessions can be held with specific demographic groups. <p>Key points of discussion raised by CCRG members included:</p>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking an 'outside-in' approach is important. Business as usual / daily engagement is needed as well as structured customer engagement. • Sydney Water is a monopoly (though it was noted that some exceptions apply), and so customers do not have a choice of moving to other suppliers. IPART is a "proxy" for competition. Through their requirements on customer engagement, IPART try to ensure customers have a say. • Not one size fits all. There is a need to listen to individuals as individuals. Customer engagement needs to be clear on the 'why' and provide sufficient and relevant information at the right time, in the right place, that is respectful of cultural needs and preferences (e.g. not in places of gambling or alcohol). Know the customer cohorts (demographics) and subgroups for customer engagement. • The Sydney Water customer engagement principles and the IPART example principles do not reflect First Nations spiritual connection to country and doesn't reflect water rights. • Customer engagement needs to be balanced and objective. • The CCRG could have a greater role in the quality control of information for customer engagement. • There is a need to manage stakeholders' expectations about what customer engagement can deliver (e.g. expectations of Sydney Water, IPART and the customer). What can customers actually influence? How did their feedback get used or not used in decision making? How best to provide information back to the customers. • Important to share customer engagement feedback within the organisation (not just externally on the website), so staff can use it across all levels. The CCRG would also appreciate more visibility of the summaries of insights for future customer engagement. • Sydney Water were open to changing the direction of the last customer engagement due to CCRG feedback, which was appreciated. • Customer engagement provides useful information on customer preferences, but expecting customers to make decisions on complex questions is unreasonable. The business may be better placed to make complex business decisions (albeit informed by customers). <p>The CCRG discussed that in order to be effective the group should keep a check on Sydney Water's approach to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer engagement facilitation (including methodology and process - the how, who, time and what issues and questions are being posed to customers) • Quality of information • Breadth of information. <p>The CCRG also discussed the importance of having a greater role in Sydney Water's customer engagement from the outset and welcomed this opportunity.</p> <p>It was agreed that IPART should be invited to a meeting to discuss their expectations of customer engagement. The CCRG would welcome the opportunity to provide feedback on IPART principles and rubric. IPART could be invited to share their views on the role and approach of the CCRG .</p>	<p>Enhance Sydney Water customer engagement principles to reflect First Nations spiritual connection to country and water.</p> <p>CCRG to consider how it can provide feedback to IPART on the customer engagement principles in the IPART Water Regulation Handbook and rubric.</p> <p>Share the Our Water Our Voice customer engagement summaries with the CCRG. (Handouts available at next meeting).</p> <p>Sydney Water to consider how it can facilitate a conversation between the CCRG and IPART.</p>
12	<p>Final comments / wrap up</p> <p>The Chair and CCRG members thanked Lucy for the information and training session which was considered to be very relevant to the role of the group and IPART</p>	<p>Distribute the training presentation to the CCRG.</p>

	expectations as well as interesting, clearly explained and catalysing constructive debate.	
	Close	
13	<p>Thanks, look-ahead to April meeting contents, meeting close</p> <p>The draft April agenda was discussed. CCRG members requested that the draft agenda be streamlined to provide adequate time for discussion. Members reinforced their support for a focus on 'urban growth' matters at this meeting</p> <p>The Chair thanked the CCRG members. Meeting closed at 2:00pm.</p>	<p>Sydney Water to streamline agenda and allow time for discussion.</p>