

Moving Towards a Water Sensitive Newcastle

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Key Points

- Engagement
- Collaboration
- Respect
- Courage

Abstract

Newcastle City Council has revised their Urban Water Cycle Policy (The Policy) in early 2017, a significant achievement in the context of moving towards a Water Sensitive City. The Policy revision process has been followed with the update of Council's Stormwater DCP and in July 2017, which includes requirements to control water quantity in Coastal Wetlands catchments to protect the internationally recognized Hexham Swamp (RAMSAR).

The significance of the Policy update may not be apparent when reading the document alone, which is all of three pages. Instead, the policy review process has captured a latent culture of collaboration and integration between dedicated staff. In an age where we are constrained by time, space, funding, climate change and lack of legislation, it is refreshing to work with people who care and wish to make a difference.

Newcastle has a history of leading practice in stormwater management. Instigated by one of the first Total Catchment Management Strategies in NSW for Throsby Creek, Council has been developing a capacity for innovation and has highlighted the gritty resilience across the workplace. Council is also a member of the Water Sensitive Cities NSW Consortium.

Keywords

Policy, Urban Water Cycle, Water Sensitive City

Introduction

This extended abstract, and presentation at the conference, shall share some of the challenges and achievements experienced through the process of updating the Policy. What has emerged from the process of reviewing the policy document is a renewed appreciation that getting the 'water sensitive cities' approach to work requires a multidisciplinary effort that engages people across all teams. Whilst this is well understood by dedicated WSUD practitioners and champions, to achieve this integration requires a shared appreciation by other key players across the organisation.

The intent of the Policy update was to align Council's services with the water sensitive cities philosophy. We recognised that there is more to Urban Water Cycle management than managing water resources and reducing flood risk, and if we are to achieve meaningful outcomes for our community as a Council we need to work together under guiding principles that form the structure of the Policy.

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Being a Smart, Liveable and Sustainable City is the key objective of our 2030 Community Strategic Plan, which has been a reference point when updating the Policy and the Stormwater DCP and is an objective we share with local water authorities and state government agencies.

In our experience, it is just as important to review how internal relationships could support constructive outcomes as it is to review any policy and documents itself. Council undertook a Blue Bus program in 2016 following feedback given in staff surveys highlighting internal issues. The Blue Bus program outlined three approaches to working with others and demonstrated how a collaborative culture can transform the work culture and lift sentiment. The program was rolled out across all disciplines, both indoor and outdoor workplaces, with a mixed attendance at training sessions. Gathering diverse employees to discuss common themes was therapeutic in itself, giving staff the opportunity to appreciate the depth of services a Council provides and the people who deliver it.

Fortunately for Council, both goodwill and resilience are present as foundational elements for improvements in practice to now be sought through the formal establishment of a water working group, an action arising from the Policy Review.

Policy Review Process

The need for the Policy update arose at a time when uncertainty lingered in Newcastle City Council for a variety of internal and external reasons. Newcastle had a strong background in stormwater management and implemented Water Sensitive Urban Design in its planning controls and policies since the 1990's. Stormwater management devices were installed throughout the local government area through public works and private developments. Some of the devices were successful and are still in operation today, others failed for a range of reasons

Thereafter a number of challenges presented themselves to a point where some in Newcastle City Council were unsupportive of WSUD and questioned the need for it as Council Policy. The frequency of political and management structures change between 2012-2016 created ongoing redirections in the organisation's policy frameworks. Such constant directional shifts made significant contributions to erode workplace culture as captured in organisational surveys during this period. As a result the Policy review required consideration of the views both for and against WSUD and the capacity of the organization to fulfill its commitment to becoming a Water Sensitive City.

The following steps guided the Policy review.

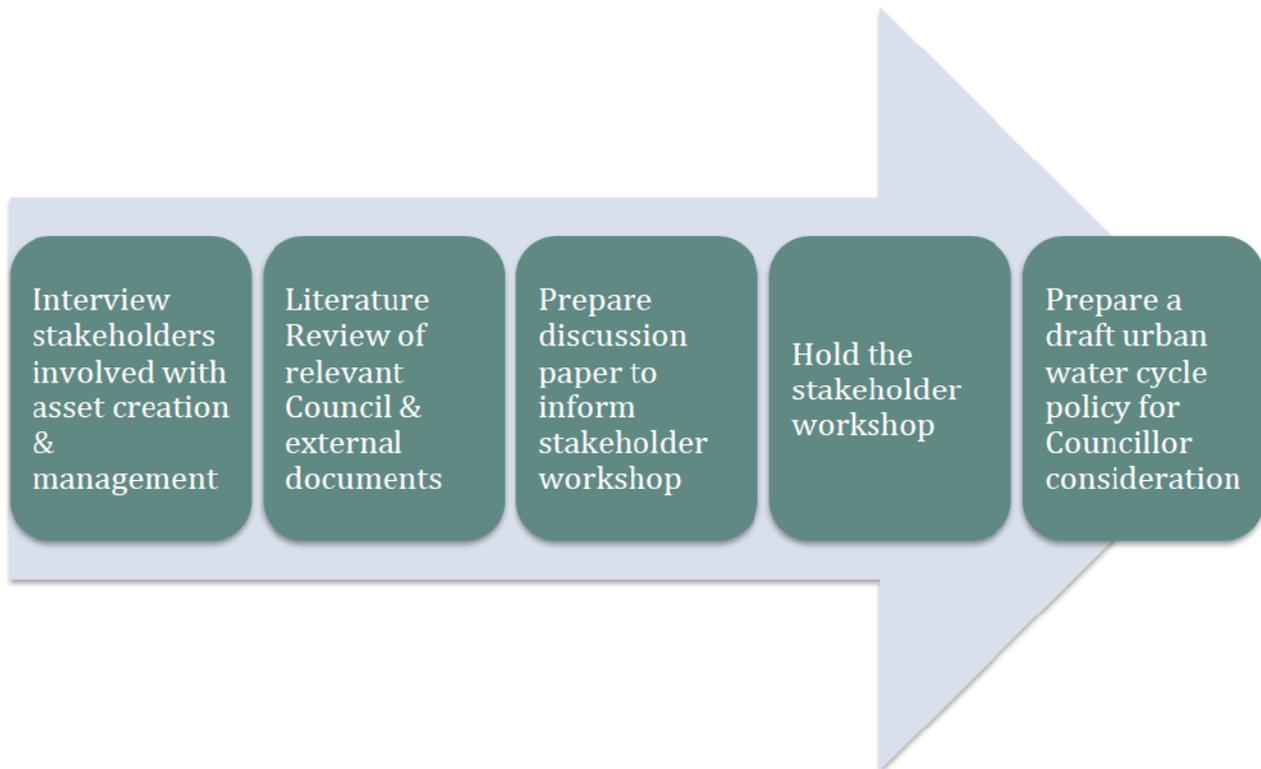


Figure 1. Urban Water Cycle Policy Review Process

The stakeholder interviews were a key element in setting the tone for the workshop. The interviews allowed parts of Council to express their concerns and discuss their views on the futures of WSUD in Council Policy. What came out of the interviews was that there is substantial goodwill within Council despite the challenges that had been experienced. In addition, a key outcome from the interviews was that even though some staff had negative experiences with WSUD there was an overriding commitment to work through the issues rather than removing the Policy. The multidisciplinary support for updating the Policy created the opportunity to develop a well-established community of practice, supported by management, to work through the issues and guide Council towards becoming a Water Sensitive City.

The workshop focused on Council's achievements to date in the delivery of Urban Water Cycle Management. This demonstrated a diverse array of Council's successful outcomes in the pursuit to conserve Newcastle's water resources, protect waterways, improve water quality and increase community engagement, giving attendees a sense of achievement. Individuals expressed their values and goals with their respective positions and an open and collaborative discussion was held.

The key outcomes of the workshop are listed below:

1. Newcastle's many beautiful waterways present a fantastic opportunity and contribute significantly to the economy through passive recreation, tourism and by attracting new development
2. Newcastle's history of tackling the difficult task of developing a City on Swamp and Floodplain lands has generated a stormwater network that brought immediate health benefits but also a legacy of erosion, pollution accumulation and ecosystem degradation

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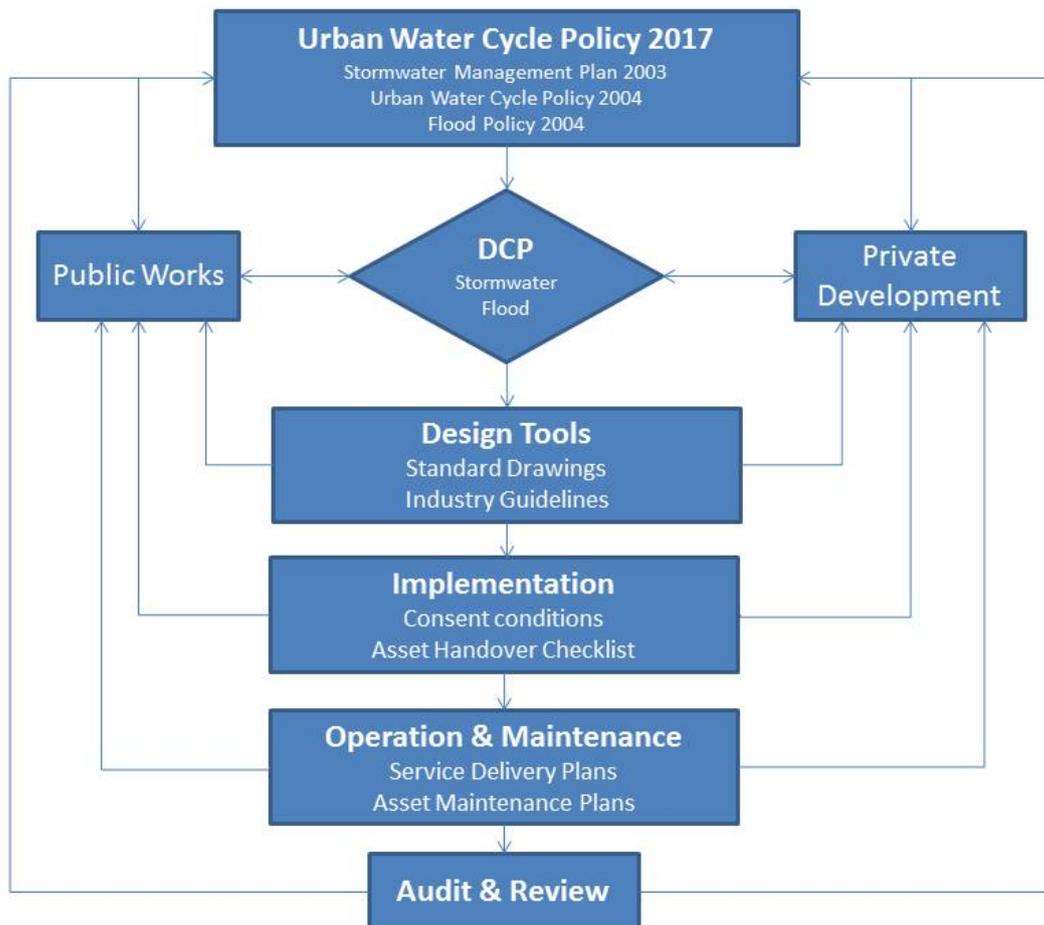
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3. Council officers have a depth of knowledge and experience that sees quality work delivered across the organization
4. Whilst there are limited human resources in Council there is funds available to outsource work
5. There is a lack of common direction between various groups of Council and an absence of a shared vision
6. A positive culture has eluded internal groups in recent history and a silo mentality limits knowledge/skills sharing across the organisation. Despite these shortcomings, committed staff have worked through uncertainty and continued to deliver high quality services for our community.
7. Staff recognize the benefits of the Water Sensitive City philosophy and are well aware of its inclusion in plans and strategies as an action to develop a Water Sensitive City Strategy
8. The Urban Water Cycle Policy revision needs to be realistic and cognizant of Council's capability and resource limitations
9. A Water Working Group should be convened to foster collaboration and implement the revised Policy
10. If Council is committed to aligning the Policy with the Water Sensitive Cities goal then it needs to build on the collaborative culture of the Blue Bus program and deliver it with available resources.

Policy Update

The policy update balances outcomes of the workshop, the Newcastle 2030 Community Strategic Plan and the IP&R framework. The Policy clearly documents the background, purpose, scope and principles of Newcastle's Urban Water Cycle. The policy was adopted by Council in early 2017. The intent of the Policy is to offer flexibility in its approach and leaving more detail to a forthcoming Implementation Framework that shall outline actions for Newcastle to move towards a Water Sensitive City.

Figure 2. Urban Water Cycle Policy Hierarchy Flowchart



Conclusions

The Urban Water Cycle Policy update of Newcastle City Council has been a journey that is to be shared with the intention of providing others in the industry an example of how a Water Sensitive City vision can be challenging to adopt. Recent periods of uncertainty and instability in Council were managed through staff collaboration that has assessed the validity of a Water Sensitive City future for Newcastle. Following recent Council mergers in NSW, Newcastle City Council hopes that sharing its experience in the Policy update can assist other Councils with their policy frameworks.

Acknowledgments

Mark Liebman - Sustainability Workshop

Nerida Taylor - Sustainability Workshop

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